

PROPAGATING THE DIVINE: PROTESTANT MODERNISM AND THE RISE OF ANGLO-AMERICAN EUGENICS

Leif Christian Tornquist

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Approved by:

Yaakov Ariel

Jason Bivins

Laurie Maffly-Kipp

Todd Ochoa

Barry Saunders

Randall Styers

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ABSTRACT

Leif Christian Tornquist: Propagating the Divine: Protestant Modernism and the Rise of Anglo-American Eugenics
(Under the direction of Professor Yaakov Ariel)

The socialization of eugenics in the United States at the turn-of-the-twentieth century was facilitated by transformations within Anglo-American Protestantism. Protestant modernism, a theological practice of interpreting providence in evolutionistic terms, contributed to affluent Anglo-Americans' acceptance and endorsement of eugenic ideas and initiatives. Eugenics rose to prominence in middle class Anglo-America as influential liberal Protestants began to reconceive God as a deity who sought to realize his redemptive purposes through the propagation of a righteous race.

This dissertation traces the intersections of modernist thought, on the one hand, and eugenic ideas, practices, and policies on the other, illustrating how the two developed hand-in-hand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Theological modernism and Anglo-American eugenics converged through a propagative faith in the ability and authority of society to direct the hereditary sources of human life so as to ensure its Christian development.

This analysis pursues its arguments by exploring the development of modernism as an evolutionistic faith. It begins with the works of two famous nineteenth century Anglo-American theologians who inaugurated the modernist tradition, Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher, and proceeds to consider the labors of influential twentieth century modernists like Shailer Mathews. It also considers the life and professional labors of America's foremost eugenicist, Charles B. Davenport. The purpose is to demonstrate that while eugenics represented a modern

scientific movement, its success in capturing public imagination and shaping public opinion in the United States intimately depended upon transformations within elite Anglo-American religiosity.

From atop the head of Caesar,
Through the scape of his breath;
Into the lungs of the dogs,
That guard eagles' nests.

I hope you're as free as the mountain air now, Dad.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Defining Protestant Modernism.....	4
Defining American Eugenics.....	12
Eugenics and American Religions.....	22
Thesis, Outline, and Limitations.....	32
Terminology.....	37
CHAPTER 1: A ‘GODLY SEED’: HORACE BUSHNELL’S ‘PROPAGATIVE’ RELIGION.....	40
Introduction.....	40
Bushnell’s Propagative Method.....	42
The Hereditary Effects of Sin: Bushnell on the Propagation of Human Races.....	49
‘Sovereignty’: Bushnell and the Origin of Racial Theism.....	55
Bushnell’s Impact on Protestant Modernism.....	64
CHAPTER 2: THE HUMAN ANIMAL: HENRY WARD BEECHER’S ‘GREAT STRUGGLE OF EXTRICATION’.....	68
Introduction.....	68
Hereditary Thought at the End of the Nineteenth Century.....	70
Beecher and Race Propagation.....	77
The Destruction of Unfitness and the Human Animal.....	87
Beecher’s Racial Theism.....	94

Beecher's Impact on Protestant Modernism.....	104
CHAPTER 3: THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACE DEGENERACY: NEWELL DWIGHT HILLIS AND RACIAL THEISM AT THE CENTURY'S TURN.....	
	107
Introduction.....	107
Anglo-American Protestants and the Problem of Race Degeneracy.....	110
Hillis and Race Degeneracy.....	118
The Race Betterment Conference.....	124
Hillis and Racial Theism.....	128
Modernism in the Era of Mainline Eugenics.....	135
CHAPTER 4: THE DIVINE PERSONALITY: SHAILER MATHEWS' EVOLUTIONARY THEISM.....	
	139
Introduction.....	139
A Religion of Life.....	143
Mathews' Critique of Scientific Materialism.....	149
An Unfinished Creation: Mathews' Engagements with Eugenics.....	153
Mathews on Eugenics and Race.....	161
Sin, Animality, and Redemption.....	166
The Paradox of the Human Animal: Mathews and Negative Eugenics.....	181
Mathews' Impact on Modernist Engagements with Eugenics.....	186
CHAPTER 5: THE GERM PLASM: CHARLES DAVENPORT AND THE SCIENCE OF RACIAL THEISM.....	
	189
Introduction.....	189
Davenport's Rejection of Propagative Religion.....	193
The Science of Mainline Eugenics.....	196

The Mainline Eugenic Way to Race Betterment.....	203
Mainline Eugenics as Racial Theism.....	208
Davenport's Filial Piety.....	211
Trustees of the Germ Plasm.....	221
Albert E. Wiggam and Trusteeship.....	230
Wiggam and the AES Sermons.....	234
CHAPTER 6: TRUSTEESHIP: THE AMERICAN EUGENICS SOCIETY'S SERMON CONTESTS.....	237
Introduction.....	237
Mainline Eugenics and the Churches.....	240
The Nature of Human Nature.....	244
The Sermons and Racial Theism.....	254
Trusteeship and the Churches.....	263
EPILOGUE.....	277
Introduction.....	277
Racial Theism and Eugenics after World War II.....	283
REFERENCES.....	290

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

On Sunday, June 20, 1926, Rev. Kenneth C. MacArthur delivered a pro-eugenics sermon to his congregation at the Federated Church in Sterling, Massachusetts. A self-described “liberal evangelical Protestant minister,”¹ MacArthur preached his sermon as part of a contest sponsored by the American Eugenics Society (AES) that year. The purpose of the contest was to promote the message of eugenics in America’s churches, institutions that, AES leaders imagined, tended to attract mentally and morally superior people. MacArthur was one of over a hundred Protestant ministers who participated in the AES contest. Like his colleagues, MacArthur was a *modernist*, a religious leader who looked to forge partnerships between Christianity and science in propagating a more righteous race. “If we take seriously the Christian purpose of realizing on earth the ideal divine society,” MacArthur implored his congregants, “we shall welcome every help which science affords. Eugenics offers a great assistance in this effort to establish a race of people who approximate the Christian ideal.”

MacArthur’s motivations for participating in the contest were at once religious and racial. He was, as he insisted at the beginning of the sermon, deeply concerned about the “welfare of our race.” He warned his congregants that fit white American families were being out-reproduced by immigrants recently arrived to the country and by a growing class of “unfit” whites who were responsible for propagating criminality, poverty, and sexual perversion, among

¹ “Random Materials,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

other social maladies. He encouraged his congregants to support eugenic measures like the segregation of the unfit and immigration restriction in order to stem the tide of degeneracy allegedly threatening the race. He also admonished his congregants not to “shirk parenthood.” Marriage and children, MacArthur explained, must become a source of “noble pride,” a badge of honor and esteem that reflected the fulfillment of one’s obligation to the race. “We must inculcate the religious duty of parenthood on the part of the fit people,” MacArthur declared, “because the family is the ideal society, the working model” of the Kingdom of God on earth. “Its laws are service, sacrifice, love, ‘the joint service of the common life’.” The holy institution of the family, MacArthur insisted, was a means to a healthier, happier race and the materialization of the kingdom of God on earth.

MacArthur saw his support for eugenics as an organic outgrowth of his modernist commitments. In supporting eugenics, he was not simply endorsing science. MacArthur envisioned the familial and racial pride fostered by eugenics as a way of encouraging allegiance to God’s kingdom. Eugenics even functioned as a vital part of his ministry as Rural Secretary of the Massachusetts Federation of Churches, with MacArthur promoting the eugenic message of race betterment as a way of bringing Massachusetts’ rural churches into a “modern, unified, and efficient program.”

MacArthur, who was so convinced that eugenics represented a Christian means of salvation, became a eugenics enthusiast. He educated himself on the subject of genetics and practiced as an amateur breeder of purebred cattle. He also served as head of a eugenically fit family. Along with his wife and children, he participated in a “Fitter Families Contest” at an Eastern States Exposition in the late 1920s. Staged by local and national eugenics organizations, Fitter Family contests were designed to stimulate a “feeling of family and race consciousness and

responsibility.”² MacArthur and his family exuded such consciousness after being awarded a “silver cup.” An archival photo depicts a proud and stately MacArthur family, radiating the confidence of having been selected as a model of eugenic fitness. MacArthur’s enthusiasm for eugenics as a Christian program is also evidenced by the fact that his sermon took second-prize in the AES’ 1926 eugenic sermon contest and, moreover, by his 1928 selection to the Massachusetts Eugenics Committee by then president of the AES, C.C. Little. MacArthur remained active in local and national eugenics organizations well into the 1930s.³

This dissertation is not a biography of Rev. MacArthur. Rather, it asks how a faith like MacArthur’s, one so enthusiastic about propagating a better human stock, came to exist? MacArthur was only one of hundreds of Protestant modernist leaders during the early twentieth century who saw eugenics as a modern Christian program for propagating a more righteous people, many of whom were far more famous than MacArthur. While MacArthur’s certainly stands out for his enthusiasm, the list of famous modernists who promoted eugenic ideas and practices includes turn of the twentieth century liberal Protestant luminaries like Josiah Strong, Newell Dwight Hillis, and Shailer Mathews. This is a dissertation about the rise of MacArthur’s brand of piety. It is an attempt to account for the deep, powerful, and earnest connections between Protestant modernism, on the one hand, and eugenic thought and practice, on the other. MacArthur represents a historical entanglement, a knot of discursive and embodied dimensions that demonstrates the ways in which, inextricably, modernist religiosity and zealotry for eugenics developed together.

² Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113-14.

³ “MacArthur, Kenneth C.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Defining Protestant Modernism

Modernism was a term used self-consciously by early twentieth century liberal Protestants as part of their efforts to distinguish their religiosity from “fundamentalism.” Modernism most broadly described a religious openness to “modernity,” a comportment that was understood in a variety of ways but most commonly as an acceptance of scientific methods. As opposed to fundamentalists, modernists embraced Higher Criticism and the interpretation of the Bible as a historical document. They also accepted and even championed evolution as an account of the origins of human life. Indeed, evolution is often seen as the most divisive point of disagreement between modernists and fundamentalists. The 1926 Scopes “Monkey” trial is traditionally interpreted as the culmination of the religio-cultural war between modernists and fundamentalists, with the trial allegedly marking the defeat of Protestant fundamentalism until its resurgence with the rise of the Christian “Right” in the 1970s and ‘80s.⁴ Conversely, the trial is taken as a victory for modernists, even though modernism, as an ardent faith in the inherent progress of Christian civilization, declined precipitously in the 1930s, a theological shift that historians mark with the rise of “neo-orthodoxy” and its much soberer view of human nature and progress.⁵

In addition to its characteristic embrace of modern science, scholars have used other, broader rubrics for distinguishing modernism as a religious platform. Church historian Martin E. Marty describes modernism as one of several turn-of-the-twentieth century Protestant comportments towards modernity. Marty distinguishes modernists from “moderns” and

⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 158.

⁵ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 288-89.

“countermoderns.” Moderns consisted of men and women who “thought of themselves as the developers of a distinctly modern consciousness.”⁶ Moderns believed themselves to “have been liberated from historic forms of religion,”⁷ with their ranks including American philosophers like William James, John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Alfred North Whitehead.⁸

Countermoderns, on the other hand, were those who resisted modernization by claiming to return to “simple and primitive forms of their faith” and included movements like premillennialism, fundamentalism, and various “new kinds of culture-negation.”⁹ Both moderns and countermoderns contrasted sharply with modernists, who Marty characterizes as the “liberal agents of the modern, progressives who actually wanted to advance the processes of change from within the Protestant core-culture.”¹⁰

In his introduction to his three-volume work, *Modern American Religion*, Marty defines modernity cognitively, as a spatial or temporal sense, especially one of disjuncture. For him, modernity denotes a cultural consciousness that anxiously perceives itself as a rupture with everything that has come before. In modernity, Marty suggests, religion is forced to reckon with a temporality that locates meaning on the horizon of what is yet to be.¹¹ Modernism, therefore, denotes the religiosity of those turn-of-the-twentieth century American Protestants who

⁶ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of It All 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 210.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Ibid., 1-2.

attempted to locate socio-political progress within the future-oriented, redemptive framework of Christianity itself.

In his classic 1976 work, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, William R. Hutchison attempted to define modernism using three criteria, all of which correspond with Marty's temporal characterization. Hutchison wrote, "I have found [...] that when 'modernism' finally became a common term in the early part of this century, it generally meant three things: first and most visibly, it meant the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture." Along with this most prominent significance, Hutchison argued, modernism also typically referred to the "idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it" and the "belief that human society is moving toward realization (even though it may never attain the reality) of the kingdom of God."¹² Hutchison's work, which so acutely registered the hopefulness that animated modernism as a theological habit of embracing modern culture as an agent of progress, was written with the gravity of a *post*-modern perspective. Penned on the far side of major twentieth century wars and atrocities, Hutchison was soberly aware of the dangers of modernism as a religious program.

The most characteristic, yet unsavory, aspects of Protestant modernism, scholarship suggests, correspond with its conscious conflation of Christianity and progress, especially the racialized understanding of civilizational advance propounded by leading modernist voices. Marty, for example, uses the 1893 World's Parliament of Religion at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago to demonstrate modernists' characteristic faith in the "ceaseless, irresistible march of civilization."¹³ The Parliament, which staged an American encounter with the world at a time in

¹² Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, 2.

¹³ Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of it All*, 18.

which the United States was realizing its imperial ambitions, can be understood as a pivotal moment in American pluralism, especially white Protestant America's increasing contact with religio-racial otherness. The Parliament and the Exposition can also be taken as measures of the limitations that have historically imposed themselves on American pluralism, especially the perpetual conflation in American political discourses between Christianity, whiteness, and fitness for democracy.¹⁴ Marty's own interpretation of the Parliament emphasizes the latter hermeneutic by underscoring its connections with a waxing "racial outlook" that championed the evolutionary fitness of the Anglo-Saxon body as the foundation for Christian civilization. Here, Marty cites Josiah Strong's participation at the Parliament and his articulation of a racialized "cosmopolitan vision" that declared the Anglo-Saxon race as "the great physical basis for empire!" Strong's modernism championed science and "Anglo-Saxon religious life" as copartners in building a global kingdom of God.¹⁵

My own interpretation of modernism synthesizes these frameworks while emphasizing the importance of race for the development of modernism as a distinct theological outlook. Or to be more exact, this dissertation focuses on a particular theistic habit *within* a broader modernist tradition, a habit of associating Christendom –its stability, perpetuity, and overall progress –with the development of the white racial body.

In understanding modernism this way, I draw upon a particular definition of the concept of modernity itself, one that I take from Michel Foucault and his theory of "biopower." In his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes,

¹⁴ Richard H. Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of it All*, 23.

But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.¹⁶

As part of his theory of biopower, Foucault defined modernity in terms of the emergence of populations (their development and wellbeing) as objects of governance. Modern, *biopolitical* society, in Foucault's idiom, denotes the emergence of a governmental apparatus (including discourses, institutions, techniques, and policies) that make the development of its people its primary concern. In this way, modernity is not simply a historical self-consciousness dialectically born through the temporal rupture of progress. It denotes the emergence of a historical subjectivity that equates progress with the development of human life itself. For Foucault, a "pre-modern" society is one in which human life remains outside of the calculations of power-knowledge, while in a modern society human life is "penetrated by [...] techniques of knowledge and power."¹⁷ In American history, the threshold of modernity began to be crossed during the nineteenth century, when institutions like homes and schools were rationalized in terms of the production of a healthy, moral, responsible body politic and when new institutions arose aimed at the normal development of American life.

For Foucault, modern racism, while irreducible to biopower, nonetheless corresponds with the rise of modernity, with racism emerging as a rationale or logic for distinguishing between which forms of life within a given population should be made to grow and which should be eliminated or left to die. Racism, for Foucault, is thus connected to modern governance as an administration of life. Racism, Foucault writes, "is primarily a way of introducing a break into

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 143.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the domain of life under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die.”¹⁸ In other words, racism is a way of differentiating between qualified and unqualified forms of life, between those forms that guarantee the normal development of a population and those that threaten to pollute or disturb its normal development.

In the United States, racism frequently fostered the deployment of eugenic ideas and practices. As I discuss below, the related concept of hereditarianism –or the idea that the inborn capacities and physical characteristics of races and stocks developed over time through biological processes –also facilitated eugenics as a formation of biopower. Premised upon the maximization of life, eugenics emerged with the notion that the elimination of unfitness within a population would strengthen the life of the body politic overall. In the United States specifically, eugenics developed along with the discriminatory discourses of hereditarianism and racism, with these discourses rationalizing the eugenic argument that socio-political progress necessitated the elimination of allegedly degenerate elements within the population. Applying Foucault's framework to nineteenth and early twentieth century American society, eugenics worked by identifying whiteness with political fitness and by associating the normal development of the country with propagation of white bodies, especially “fit” white bodies. Conversely, eugenics worked by associating the propagation of non-white or hereditarily unfit bodies with the degeneracy of the body politic, which was conceived as a living organism whose normal growth

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *'Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 254.

required the collaboration of important institutions like homes, churches, schools, hospitals, and prisons.¹⁹

In using the term modernism, therefore, I understand a Protestant religiosity that was not only open to, but that was a champion for, modern techniques of power aimed at the normal development of the body politic. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these modes of power were hereditarian and racist and so was Protestant modernism. Functioning as an elite religious discourse of white middle class Protestants –especially “old stock” New England Protestants –modernism facilitated the rise of eugenics by fostering two overlapping modes of discrimination. Hereditarianism and racism provided frameworks for hierarchizing the body politic in terms of its reproductive potential and for understanding which segments of the population should be encouraged to reproduce for the sake of national development and which should be discouraged. Modernism, I argue, socialized these modes of discrimination within white middle class communities by theistically reconceiving human heredity as a medium through which God worked to propagate his righteous kingdom on earth.

In its earliest iterations, modernism developed as a discourse of racial theism that located providence and national prosperity within the hereditary cultivation of the white racial body. Importantly, this theistic discourse supported a form of elite Anglo-American Christianity that was racially propagative in scope and practice, with modernism developing as a theological discourse that sanctified the transformation of the home into a racially propagative institution. In this way, modernism fostered the rise of eugenics during the late nineteenth century, with eugenic ideas and practice maturing as white middle class Americans –especially New

¹⁹ For an extended reflection on Foucault’s theory of biopower and the history of American racism, see Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Englanders –learned to identify race propagation with national progress or decline. Eugenics, in my understanding, was thus not simply a science, but a religiously motivated attitude or comportment taken with respect to the relative worth of one racial group or stock’s reproductive potential over another’s. Eugenic ideas and practices rose to prominence in the United States as affluent whites Northerners came to identify their power with their hereditary potential and, in turn, to read this potential in both theistic and nationalistic terms.

As a theistic practice of reconciling evolutionism and God, modernism emerged at the intersection of theology, religious practice, and a tendency to locate progress within the purposeful propagation of human life. My central thesis is that Protestant modernism and eugenic thought and practice developed together in the United States, with the former emerging and maturing as a theological habit of naturalizing propagative methods aimed at the development of a better body politic. My purpose, therefore, is to present neither an exhaustive history of modernist Protestantism nor American eugenics. The objective instead is to show how modernist Protestantism nurtured eugenic ideas and practices in predominantly Northeastern Anglo-American society by promulgating the hope that Christian families could advance a godly civilization through the propagation of a more righteous race.

Pursuing this objective necessitates writing a history of eugenics that is different than the traditional narrative. I depart from the standard historiography of viewing eugenics as part of the history of science by showing how eugenic ideas developed at the same time affluent Anglo-Americans in New England and elsewhere began to identify their propagation with national destiny. Eugenic thought and practice, in other words, emerged in tandem with a Protestant theistic habit of viewing God as a deity who sought to realize his creative purposes through the propagation of a righteous race. The ultimate objective is, therefore, to show how a modernist

religiosity like MacArthur's was part of a much longer elite Anglo-American tradition of viewing propagation as a divine method. Beginning with Horace Bushnell, who, in the mid-nineteenth century, prophesied the peaceful conquest of the world through the propagative power of Anglo-Saxon "seed," and ending with twentieth century modernists' like MacArthur who foretold the coming of a race that approximated the Christian ideal, this dissertation traces the intersection of modernism and eugenics through the practice of race propagation.

Defining American Eugenics

American eugenics was a popular and professional movement for reproductive hygiene that peaked in the decades leading up to World War II. The fundamental assumption advanced by eugenicists and their supporters was that society could and should improve the population by controlling hereditary aspects of human reproduction. Eugenics thus developed as part of biopolitical processes associated with modernization. As scholars of international eugenics argue, understanding eugenics as a part of modernization helps to explain why countries around the globe –including in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia –developed eugenics programs. Eugenics often developed in modernizing countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as governmental administrations became tasked with the care and cultivation of their respective populations.²⁰

²⁰ Marius Turda has written extensively on eugenics in Eastern Asia: Marius Turda, *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe 1900-1940* (New York: Central European University Press, 2006); *Modernism and Eugenics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *Eugenics and Nation in Early Twentieth Century Hungary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014). See also, Christian Promitzer, Sevasti Trubeta, and Marius Turda, eds., *Health, Hygiene, and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945* (New York: Central European University Press, 2011); Marius Turda, ed. *The History of East-Central European Eugenics 1900-1945: Sources and Commentaries* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). For a discussion of eugenics in Turkey, see Ayça Alemdarağlu, "Politics of the Body and Eugenics Discourse in Early Republican Turkey," *Body and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2005, pp. 61-76. Turda has also written on Latin Eugenics: *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*

Building on previous scholarship, I define eugenics as a set of modern naturalistic discourses, practices, techniques, and policies that identified reproductive hygiene with socio-political progress. Eugenics was built upon the concept of hereditarianism, which, at the time, equated biology with national destiny. Eugenics emerged as a reproductive morality built upon the hereditarian assumption that one could discern between qualified and unqualified forms of life, especially those whose heredity supposedly precipitated progress and those whose heredity allegedly produced decline. Because it located national development within heredity, eugenics matured through the development of measures aimed at fostering reproduction among supposedly fit groups and discouraging and even preventing reproduction among the allegedly unfit. Eugenic ideas and practices rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century United States and peaked during the early twentieth century, an era of rapid demographic and cultural change initiated by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Eugenics represented a modern approach to governance in so far as it sought to achieve societal progress through the healthful development of population and to the extent that it viewed the body politic as something that could be grown and cultivated.

Scholars have described eugenics as a racist pseudoscience,²¹ one that sought to preserve Anglo-American socio-political power in the face of a number of cultural shifts initiated by turn-

(London: Bloomsbury Academic 2014). For another treatment of Latin American eugenics, see Nancy Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). For a treatment of eugenics in China, see Frank Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects, and Eugenics in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For a history of eugenics in Kenya, see Chloe Campbell, *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2011).

²¹ Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race on Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

of-the-twentieth century industrialization.²² Matthew Frye Jacobson, for example, characterizes eugenics as an ideology of scientific racism that rationalized xenophobic attitudes and responses toward immigration. Jacobson's classic analysis locates eugenics at the intersection of scientific racism and nativist sentiment, with Jacobson reading the rise of eugenics as a consequential development within a longer Anglo-American tradition of identifying political fitness with whiteness.²³

While eugenics helped to rationalize American nativism during the early twentieth century and while it more generally made racist ideas and practices towards non-white groups respectable, eugenics is irreducible to scientific racism. As it developed in the United States, eugenics was *always* hereditarian but it was not always racist. Hereditarianism supported racism, but hereditarianism was not racist per se. Hereditarianism referred to the idea that human differences were perpetuated reproductively through biology. It also suggested that, via the control of human propagation, one could normalize the development of populations. In this way, hereditarianism could and did support scientific racism in so far as it served as the foundation for

²² There is an ongoing debate over the relationship between eugenics and scientific racism. The emerging consensus argues that while eugenics and scientific racism are not the same thing, the former was often used as mode of discrimination that justified eugenics as mode of power. Nikolas Rose, for example, argues that race and nationalism, while irreducible to eugenics, intersected with it ways that ultimately defined its operation. In a book in which he distinguishes between twentieth and twenty first century biopolitics, Rose writes, “‘population’, ‘quality’, ‘territory’, ‘nation’, ‘race’,” –these were the terms that were fused in the discourse of eugenics and the terms that gave it its specific, and ultimately murderous character.” Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 56. I agree with Rose and other who maintain a distinction between eugenics and scientific racism but who also view scientific racism as an integral part of the development of eugenics as a set of historical discourses, practices, and policies. Maintaining this distinction is important because, as I discuss below, the victims of scientific racism, like African Americans, also promoted and adopted eugenic practices.

²³ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 39-90.

thinking about race in terms of biology. But one could subscribe to hereditarianism and not be racist. One could, for example, believe that heredity produced innate differences but that these differences could not be used to make generalizations about the dispositions or capacities of entire races. Furthermore, one could be racist while insisting that there were members of one's own race who were hereditarily inferior.

Distinguishing between hereditarianism and racism helps to explain important dimensions of Anglo-American eugenics. During the early twentieth century, for example, eugenic policies targeted poor “feeble-minded” whites in addition to non-whites, a fact that proves difficult to explain when one equates eugenics solely with scientific racism. The fact that eugenic sterilization laws focused on the fecundity of poor white women during the 1920s and ‘30s, for example, demonstrates that the discriminatory framework of hereditarianism cut both ways, allowing eugenicists to discriminate against the reproductive behavior of whites and non-whites alike.²⁴ Linked to hereditarianism, eugenics developed as a matrix of discourses, strategies, techniques, and policies intended to promote, enforce, and normalize propagative behavior as a means to national advancement. As it matured in the early twentieth century, eugenics included “positive” strategies that attempted to incentivize procreative behavior among fit groups and “negative” measures (e.g., immigration restriction and compulsory sterilization) that sought to curb the propagative impact of allegedly unfit groups.

Scholarship distinguishes between three forms of eugenics discourse in the United States. Only one of these discourses, referred to by scholars as “mainline” eugenics, was supported by whites, although it was the most popular eugenics discourse, the most politically dominant, and

²⁴ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 32-94.

the most consequential with respect to American social policy.²⁵ Rising to prominence in the first few decades of the twentieth century, mainline eugenics sought to improve the population through policies that supported white reproductive hygiene. Advocates of “hard” heredity, mainline eugenicists endorsed a eugenics program that privileged hereditary interventions over environmental reforms in endeavoring to preserve the racial hierarchy of segregated America. Charles Davenport, a proud scion of New England, was one of America’s most prominent mainline eugenicists. An evolutionary biologist and a defender of scientific racism, Davenport saw eugenics as a means to strengthening national life through the hereditary cultivation of the white racial body. Mainline eugenicists believed that national prosperity necessitated the preservation of a racial hierarchy in which different racial stocks played different socio-economic roles. The leadership of the native white stock, mainline eugenicists insisted, needed to be preserved and enhanced in order to ensure national greatness. Davenport developed eugenics as a scientific practice during the 1910s and ‘20s, while also promoting eugenics as a popular movement.²⁶ He supported negative eugenic measures like immigration restriction and sterilization in addition to positive eugenic incentives, both of which were aimed at the preservation and enhancement of native Anglo-American stock. American mainline eugenics has received the most scholarly attention to date.

²⁵ Daniel Kevles coined the term “mainline” eugenics in his classic 1985 work. Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1985]), 96-112. Since then, scholars of eugenics in the United States have followed suit, using the term mainline eugenics to distinguish an elite white supremacist scientific discourse promoted by the white Protestant establishment from other eugenics discourse in the United States. See, for example, Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 86.

²⁶ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 41-66. Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America’s Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 108-37).

Mainline eugenicists promoted population development through three general race hygiene initiatives during the 1910s, '20s and '30s: 1) the encouragement of “fit” whites to marry and have more children; 2) the elimination of inferior stock within the white race; 3) the biological protection of white America from the hereditary influence of allegedly inferior races. In pursuing the first initiative, mainline eugenicists developed positive eugenics programs, including popular education campaigns and eugenic sermon contests that facilitated cooperation with churches in order to spread the gospel of reproductive fitness.²⁷ In pursuing the second initiative, eugenicists promoted negative eugenic measures like the segregation and sterilization of unfit whites,²⁸ while they advocated and helped to enact immigration restriction and anti-miscegenation laws in pursuing the third.²⁹

Twenty-first century Americans’ tend to associate eugenics almost exclusively with what scholars have come to identify as mainline eugenics. Mainline eugenics was an elitist scientific discourse promoted by old stock Anglo-Saxon Protestants like Charles Davenport and Madison Grant. Mainline eugenicists like Davenport and Grant characteristically linked the fate of the country to the continuing socio-political dominance of historically powerful New England families. American national identity and superiority, they argued, was located within the elect hereditary comportment of native New England stock.

²⁷ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 111-37.

²⁸ Nicole Hahn Raft, ed. *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 65-95.

²⁹ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 77-90. Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation’s Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 137-166.

Contemporary scholars and popular writers alike have unearthed the mutually formative relationship between the rise of mainline eugenics and the development of Nazism, demonstrating how mainline eugenics' quest for national development through white racial purity directly influenced the rise of race hygiene in Germany.³⁰ The salient connections between American eugenics and Nazi race hygiene have come to dominate contemporary Americans' understandings of eugenics in the United States, with American eugenics becoming almost exclusively associated with the scientific discourse of white supremacy. However, while eugenics and scientific racism in the United States developed hand-in-hand, eugenics is more accurately conceived as part of an apparatus that developed around and through the concept of hereditarianism, an apparatus that supported scientific racism but that is irreducible to racism itself.

As a science of population development, mainline eugenics developed largely through the efforts of Charles Davenport, who claimed inspiration from the British statistician and cousin of Charles Darwin, Sir Francis Galton. Galton coined the term "eugenics" (literally, "wellborn") in 1883 to denote his hereditary science of statecraft and empire building.³¹ Galton's work had an early influence in the United States through the utopian labors of John Humphrey Noyes and his Oneida experiment.³² Galton's work did not find mainstream influence in the United States,

³⁰ Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).

³¹ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883).

³² Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias: the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 205-80.

however, until Davenport's work in the early twentieth century. Davenport updated and adapted Galton's ideas, largely by placing eugenics on the footing of modern genetics. Combining Gregor Mendel's work on dominant and recessive traits with August Weismann's 1893 theory of heredity, Davenport created a hereditary science that predicated national advancement upon the cultivation of the white racial "germ plasm."³³ Technically, the germ plasm referred to the hereditary substances located within human sex cells. But Davenport also used the term to denote the propagative potential of the country. Indeed, for Davenport the germ plasm was a national resource.

Most scholarship to date has focused on mainline eugenics' successful enactments of negative eugenic policies. Mainline eugenicists, for example, directly influenced the passage of the highly restrictive 1924 Immigration Bill, the enactment of Virginia's sterilization law that was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1927 decision in *Buck v. Bell*, and the institution of anti-miscegenation statutes. As scholars have documented, each of these components of mainline eugenics' race hygiene program had serious consequences. Over the course of the twentieth century, for example, over sixty thousand Americans were legally sterilized thanks to the Supreme Court's decision in *Buck v. Bell*.³⁴

The other two American eugenics discourses identified by scholars were developed and promoted by African Americans seeking socio-political empowerment in segregated America. These eugenics discourses were smaller in scale and influence than their mainline counterpart. Gregory Michael Dorr and Angela Logan refer to the first of these as "assimilationist" eugenics,

³³ Charles B. Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911).

³⁴ For a recent history of state-sponsored sterilization in North America, see Randall Hansen and Desmond King, *Sterilized by the State: Eugenics, Race, and the Population Scare in Twentieth-Century North America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

which is distinct from the other mode of African American eugenics that supported the separatist racial politics of black nationalist groups like Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI).³⁵ Both of these African American eugenics discourses, scholars suggest, can be understood as responses to mainline eugenics, especially the claims it made regarding black racial inferiority and the policies it enacted to promote white racial hygiene.³⁶

Black support for eugenics was considerably smaller than whites'. Nonetheless, eugenic thought and practice found some popular endorsement among African Americans.

Assimilationist eugenics represented a popular eugenics discourse promoted by leading race intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, male and female African American medical and scientific professionals, and health minded women's writers who sought to develop programs of black racial uplift in segregated America.³⁷ Assimilationist eugenics rejected mainline eugenicists' racism while accepting hereditarianism, insisting that, while there were no significant differences between human races with respect to intelligence and morality, each race consisted of good and bad stocks. Under Du Bois leadership, the NAACP served as the mouthpiece for assimilationist eugenics, staging positive eugenics programs to promote reproductive hygiene within "fit"

³⁵ Gregory Michael Dorr and Angela Logan, "'Quality, Not Mere Quantity Counts': Black Eugenics and the NAACP Baby Contests," in *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 68-92. Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 218-39.

³⁶ Dorr and Logan, "'Quality, Not Mere Quantity Counts': Black Eugenics and the NAACP Baby Contests," 70-71. Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America's 'Worst' Family: Eugenics, Islam, and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 139-54.

³⁷ Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 35-64. Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 76-140.

African American communities.³⁸ Assimilationist eugenics never developed an operative negative eugenics agenda and, in contradistinction to mainline eugenics, emphasized environmental reforms over hereditary interventions. Yet leading proponents of assimilationist eugenics made hereditarian distinctions between racially worthy and unworthy individuals while also endorsing birth control for poor blacks whose fecundity supposedly stymied racial uplift.³⁹ The goal of assimilationist eugenics was to ensure full socio-political enfranchisement for African Americans through a racial uplift program grounded in reproductive hygiene.

Black nationalist movements like the UNIA and the NOI adapted popular eugenic ideas and practices in their separatist racial programs.⁴⁰ Black nationalist groups inverted the racist claims made by mainline eugenicists, upholding the black body as a reproductive ideal. Unlike those who supported assimilationist eugenics, black nationalist groups embraced certain eugenic ideas as part of their efforts to preserve black racial purity in the face of white oppression and, especially in the NOI's case, as part of a commitment to a political ideology that envisioned the restoration of black political dominance. In inverting the racism advanced by mainline eugenicists, the UNIA and NOI thus modified many of its key moralizations, including mainline eugenics' emphasis on progress through white racial hygiene. As Michele Mitchel demonstrates,

³⁸ Dorr and Logan, "'Quality, Not Mere Quantity Counts': Black Eugenics and the NAACP Baby Contests," 75.

³⁹ Deutsch, *Inventing America's Worst Family*, 151.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 130-54. Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 218-39. I am aware of the issues raised by Edward E. Curtis in defining the NOI as a nationalist, rather than a *religious*, movement. I agree with his argument that the religious dimensions of the NOI were a vital part of its group identity and solidarity. Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1-14. I include the NOI here as a black nationalist group simply for the sake of convenience. Its association with black nationalism also helps to underscore the eugenic components of the NOI as a race conscious group.

black nationalist groups like the UNIA promoted race hygiene through pro-natal ideologies that supported traditional gender roles and sexualities.⁴¹

Eugenics and American Religions

Eugenics frequently bridged religious and scientific aspirations for social betterment, while eugenic ideas and practices were promoted by a number of American ethnic and racial groups who belonged to different and even competing religious traditions. As scholarship increasingly shows, American religions played a leading role in shaping public acceptance of eugenic ideas and practices. Far from describing a war between American religions and eugenics, scholars instead highlight the ways in which American religious expression positively and negatively influenced the social acceptance of eugenics as a professional and popular discourse of reproductive hygiene.

As Sharon Leon argues, American Catholics were the most vociferous opponents of mainline eugenics.⁴² Although American Catholics demonstrated qualified support for particular aspects of eugenics –especially aspects of its pro-natal morality –scholars like Leon emphasize concerted Catholic opposition to negative eugenic policies like sterilization and the hereditarian and highly racialized models of degeneracy that scientifically and morally authorized these policies. Importantly, Catholics opposed negative eugenics ideas and policies on both religious *and* scientific grounds.⁴³

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*, 218-39.

⁴² Sharon M. Leon, *An Image of God: the Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 5. Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 204. Marouf A. Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 107.

Before the U.S. Supreme Court's 1927 constitutional endorsement of eugenic sterilization in *Buck v. Bell* and Pope Pius XI's 1930 condemnation of sterilization in *Casti Connubii*, "a spectrum of Catholic opinion [on eugenics] existed."⁴⁴ Catholics tended to support positive eugenics initiatives aimed at strengthening family life.⁴⁵ They also sympathized with the general aim of improving the human race.⁴⁶ Yet scholars argue that Catholics grew more uniform in their opposition to eugenics as mainline eugenicists succeeded in enacting negative eugenic initiatives during the 1920s,⁴⁷ with Catholics attacking the empiricism of mainline eugenicists' claims regarding the hereditary basis of moral and physical degeneracy. Catholics forged one of the most consistent and successful oppositions to state sterilization laws across the country.⁴⁸

Catholics were often drawn to eugenic ideas and practices out of an interest social reform. Yet Catholics opposed eugenics as a practice of race hygiene, especially the practice of sterilization. Scholars argue that much of Catholic moral opposition to sterilization originated within Catholicism itself, with Catholics drawing upon the Thomistic tradition of natural law to counter the ethical precepts of negative eugenics. This tradition included an emphasis on the dignity of the person,⁴⁹ recognizing the "potential for every member of [of society] to contribute to the common good, regardless of material limitations."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 139.

⁴⁵ Leon, *An Image of God*, 9.

⁴⁶ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 143. Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁸ Leon, *An Image of God*, 66-88.

⁴⁹ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 140.

But, as scholarship also emphasizes, Catholic opposition to negative eugenics arose from the unique position of the American Catholic community with respect to mainstream American religious life. Recently arrived Catholics from Ireland and Southern Europe were often the objects of eugenic discrimination, particularly the nativism that characteristically found expression in negative eugenic policies like immigration restriction.⁵¹ Indeed, Catholic engagements with mainline eugenics cannot be dissociated from the issue of immigration, the question of assimilation, and, as Matthew Frye Jacobson attests, the politics of whiteness during the early twentieth century.⁵² With American mainline eugenicists and their sympathizers understanding religious life in hereditarian terms, viewing themselves as racially Protestant while vilifying the degeneracy supposedly represented by Catholicism, mainline eugenic thinking and initiatives underscore the fact that race, religious affiliation, and the question of socio-political fitness were inextricably bound up with one another during the eugenics era.⁵³ Catholic opposition to mainline eugenics, therefore, often focused on the intrinsic connections that eugenicists drew between religious affiliation and hereditary fitness, frequently by calling public attention to the ways in which mainline eugenic science and policies perpetuated Nordic Protestant prejudice.⁵⁴

Catholic opposition also took aim at mainline eugenicists' claims regarding the power of biology, with Catholics insisting that environment played an equally powerful role in

⁵⁰ Leon, *An Image of God*, 4.

⁵¹ Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, 93-94.

⁵² Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 69-70.

⁵³ Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 39-42.

⁵⁴ Leon, *An Image of God*, 60-61.

determining human potential. Importantly, as Leon argues, Catholic challenges to hereditary determinism did not represent a clash between religious and scientific worldviews, but rather, an opposition to the empirical dubiousness of a eugenicists' scientific methodology.⁵⁵ To a much greater extent than Protestant leaders, Catholic clergymen were critical of the mainline eugenic claim that degeneracy was transmitted solely through human heredity.⁵⁶ In disagreeing with mainline eugenicists' principal scientific tenet (i.e., that biology determined destiny), Catholic leaders often articulated competing versions of race betterment that focused on social justice issues and environmental reforms that could ameliorate the same socio-economic disparities that the mainline eugenic language of hereditarianism sought to naturalize.⁵⁷

Christine Rosen briefly considers the support that eugenic ideas and practices found within Reformed Jewish communities in New York. During the early years of mainline eugenics' rise to power, Reformed Jewish leaders, Rosen argues, demonstrated a "measured support for eugenics,"⁵⁸ typically out of an interest in social reform like their Catholic and Protestant counterparts. While Jewish engagements with eugenics in the United States remains one of the most neglected dimensions of American eugenics, no doubt because of its potential controversy, Rosen shows that there is evidence to suggest that Jewish attempts to wrestle with eugenic ideas and practices constituted an important part of Eastern European Jews' attempts to navigate assimilation. Leading Reformed Rabbis like Stephen S. Wise, Rosen argues, engaged eugenics in

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁶ Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, 102-04. Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 146.

⁵⁷ Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*, 102-04.

⁵⁸ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 109.

debating the question of intermarriage.⁵⁹ Rosen suggests that the eugenic question of national development through race betterment was seen by growing ethnic minorities as a prerequisite for socio-political inclusion, with politically powerful non-white groups like Catholics and Jews understanding that their acceptance into the American mainstream (racially, religiously, and politically defined) depended upon their ability to publicly tackle the eugenic syllogism of socio-political progress through racial improvement.

While there is a growing body of scholarship on African American engagements with eugenics, there is still very little known about how black religious life shaped said engagements. In one of the most important works on American eugenics published to date, Michele Mitchell demonstrates how the hereditarian discourse of eugenics provided race conscious African Americans, particularly modernizing medical professionals, intellectuals, clergymen, and women writers, with an ideology and practice for affirming the nobility of the black body in the face of the racism and oppression perpetuated by white eugenicists and other pro-segregation whites. Most generally, her work uncovers the flexibility of eugenics with respect to the politics of segregation after Reconstruction, with eugenics capable of supporting the scientifically encoded white supremacism of mainline eugenics, the scientifically informed assimilationist agenda of elite African Americans like Du Bois, and the separatist ideology of black nationalists like Marcus Garvey. Unfortunately, however, the role of religion in African American cooption of eugenics discourse remains a peripheral concern for Mitchell, with her work sometimes including the voices of race conscious religious leaders but not pausing to reflect upon the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 99-109.

specific role that black religion or churches may have played in shaping these leaders' support for science inspired racial uplift.⁶⁰

Nathaniel Deutsch's 2009 work sheds light on the relationship between African American religious expression and the socialization of eugenic ideas and practices in African American communities. Deutsch's work underscores the important role that Islam, as a claim to "Asiatic" otherness, played in the development of black religious movements like Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple and the NOI. The claim to Islamic identity allowed race conscious African Americans to sever ties with the history of Christian oppression (of which mainline eugenics was seen as a part) by enabling an alternative and empowering narrative of black racial otherness. In fact, "one of the most fundamental and enduring beliefs of the Nation of Islam," the Yakub myth, demonstrates the ways in which Islamic otherness permitted NOI members to incorporate eugenic ideas into their quest for racial separation while at the same time inverting the racial stereotypes of blacks perpetuated by mainline eugenicists.⁶¹ In this way, the NOI represents an important example of the ways in which religious identity fostered a historically oppressed minority's appropriation of eugenic ideas and practices into an empowering, if politically marginalized vision of racial progress. Although he does not talk about eugenics per se, Edward J. Curtis' history of the NOI and its "ethics of the black Muslim body" help to confirm Deutsch's depiction of the importance of racial health for the NOI as a religious group.⁶²

⁶⁰ Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*.

⁶¹ Deutsch, *Inventing America's 'Worst' Family*, 151-52.

⁶² Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 95-130.

Scholarship on eugenics and American religions has primarily focused on liberal Protestantism. This body of research has zeroed in on one question in particular: why were liberal Protestants such vocal supporters of eugenic initiatives? As Christine Rosen observes, “[Liberal] Protestants proved the most enthusiastic and numerically powerful group of religious participants in the eugenics movement.”⁶³ Rosen and others have uncovered the leading role played by liberal Protestants in the popularization of mainline eugenic initiatives, arguing that liberal Protestant clergymen embraced eugenics through their progressive faiths and their modernist commitments to forging partnerships with science in building a Christian society.

More broadly, research suggests that explaining liberal Protestant support entails understanding the ways in which mainline American Protestantism facilitated the mainstreaming of eugenic modes of discrimination, including the justification of socio-economic hierarchies in hereditarian terms and a racialized morality of evolutionary struggle. Some scholars also suggest that comprehending liberal Protestant Christianity, as a matrix of mainstream ideals for human embodiment, shaped the secularity of eugenics, especially mainline eugenic knowledge and practice. In insisting as much, these scholars have nuanced the conclusions drawn by some historians who explain the development of eugenics in terms of the waxing authority of science as an agent of modernization. Michael Burleigh, for example, argues that the appeal of eugenics lay in its capacity to inspire devotion to a new scientific creed that outmoded the “Judeo-Christian moral tradition.”⁶⁴ Scholars who have focused on eugenics in the American context, however, argue that Anglo-American Protestantism itself facilitated the mainstreaming of

⁶³ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 15.

⁶⁴ Michael Burleigh, “Eugenic Utopias and the Genetic Present,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 62.

eugenic modes of discrimination, thereby emphasizing continuities between mainline Protestantism and eugenic morality and ideals.

Thus, for example, in the earliest critical history of eugenic thought in the United States, Richard Hofstadter argued that nineteenth century liberal Protestants like Henry Ward Beecher embraced social Darwinism as a way of translating Calvinist doctrines of election and innate depravity into the deterministic idiom of heredity, which helped to acculturate social Darwinist concepts by fusing them to middle class American socio-economic ideals.⁶⁵ Hofstadter's argument suggests that eugenic ideas and practices did not arise *in spite* of culturally dominant patterns of American religiosity or *apart* from these patterns, but *within* and *through* them, with eugenic modes of discrimination achieving social legitimacy in the American context through the theological, moralistic, and racialized lineage of Calvinist Protestantism.

Since the 1990s, a number of analyses of the intersections between liberal Protestantism and eugenic thought and practice have been published.⁶⁶ This work corresponds with a broader "discovery" of the popular dimensions of American eugenics, especially recent revelations regarding the extent to which eugenic thought and practice saturated nearly all dimensions of white middle class American culture in the decades before World War II.⁶⁷ Taken as a whole,

⁶⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992 [1944]), 10.

⁶⁶ Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; Leila Zenderland, "Biblical Biology: American Protestant Social Reformers and the Early Eugenics Movement," *Science in Context*, Vol. 11, pp. 511-25; Dennis L. Durst, "Evangelical Engagements with Eugenics, 1900-1940," *Ethics and Medicine*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 45-53; Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*; Amy Laura Hall, *Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); Brian C. Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

this body of research confirms and expands Hofstadter's early conclusions, revealing that public acceptance of eugenics was advanced by transformations within white Protestant Christianity itself.

Two examples from this body of scholarship will help convey this point. In her 2008 monograph, Amy Laura Hall shows how mainline eugenic modes of discrimination gained social acceptance through the development of early twentieth century Protestant domesticity, illustrating how eugenic ideas and practices successfully folded religious and scientific aspirations together into a common discourse of procreative hygiene.⁶⁸ Her work thus demonstrates that the white, middle class, religiously liberal household functioned as one of the most important relays for the social dissemination of eugenic morality. In this way, Hall's analysis contributes to an emerging body of work on eugenics, gender, and sexuality,⁶⁹ in addition to enlarging our understanding of an important chapter in American Protestant history. More recently, Brian C. Wilson has explored the popularization of eugenics through the life and labor of John Harvey Kellogg. Wilson uses the professional labors of Kellogg, the famous

⁶⁷ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: the Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of Defective Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); English, *Unnatural Selections*; Christine Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Popular Eugenics, National Efficiency, and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Susan Currell and Christine Cogdell, *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006).

⁶⁸ Hall, *Conceiving Parenthood*, 213-89.

⁶⁹ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Twentieth Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation*; Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Seventh Day Adventist and American health reformer, to demonstrate the ways in which Protestant modernism, as a theological commitment to seeing human evolution as an ongoing work of redemption, boosted liberal Protestant acceptance of mainline eugenics as a practice of race hygiene. Wilson's autobiography of Kellogg helps us to understand how Kellogg's theological modernism bridged religious and eugenic discourses, providing a crucial discursive matrix through which mainline eugenics claimed Christian, and thus social authenticity.⁷⁰

For some scholars, explaining liberal Protestant support for eugenics has also involved attending to the ways in which Protestantism shaped and legitimated mainline eugenics' secularity, especially the moral idealism that animated its hereditary struggle for race hygiene. Harry Bruinius, for example, shows how the career of Charles Davenport, America's most prominent eugenicist during the teens and twenties, bore the moralistic impress of his proud Puritan identity.⁷¹ Sean McCloud's book on class in American religions and Ava Chamberlain's reinterpretation of the life and legacy of Jonathan Edwards' paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Tuttle, reveal how the secularity of mainline eugenics was premised upon racial categories and ideals that were profoundly Protestant in inspiration and implicitly and explicitly rooted in a New England sense of hereditary election.⁷² These works help to resolve a major oversight in existing scholarship on whiteness and eugenics in America by showing how mainline eugenic categories of racial fitness were barely conceivable apart from Northeastern middle class Protestant norms and ideals for human embodiment. Moreover, they help us to account for white middle class

⁷⁰ Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living*, 133-170.

⁷¹ Bruinius, *Better for All the World*, 108-137.

⁷² McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies*; Ava Chamberlain, *The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle: Marriage, Murder, and Madness in the Family of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 159-89.

America's general willingness to accept or even embrace negative eugenic policies like sterilization, policies that were premised upon "ideas of human perfectibility."⁷³

Thesis, Outline, and Limitations

Drawing upon original archival research and building upon existing scholarship on American religions and eugenics, this dissertation argues that Protestant modernist religiosity facilitated the socialization of eugenic ideas, practices, and policies within religiously liberal, white American middle and upper classes. Protestant modernism and eugenic thought and practice, I argue, emerged and developed together as affluent white Protestants in the Northeast began to associate propagation with the advance of Christian civilization.

This dissertation enhances previous scholarship on American religions and eugenics in two important ways. First, it pushes the narrative back by showing how eugenic ideas and practices did not emerge in the twentieth century with the rise of science, but rather, in the mid-nineteenth century, as white New England Protestants began to view propagation as a method for advancing Christendom. Second, and relatedly, it broadens our understanding of the relationship between American religiosity and eugenics by defining the latter not in terms of science but in terms of a modern tendency to locate socio-political stability and progress within human reproductive practices. Protestant modernism, as a religiosity of the white elite in the Northeastern United States, did more than any other form of American piety to promote such a propagative vision of progress.

Chapter one explores the work of Horace Bushnell, a nineteenth century New England minister who is credited as being the founder of Protestant modernism. Bushnell provided the

⁷³ Véronique Mottier, "Eugenics and the State: Policy-Making in Comparative Perspective," *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, eds. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142-43.

framework for the development of modernism as a propagative theology. In his famous work, *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell argued that Christians could be grown and not converted. He insisted that the redemptive scope of Christianity should focus on the propagation of a “godly seed.” In so doing, Bushnell inaugurated modernism as a discourse of racial theism, that is, as a theistic habit of identifying providence with the hereditary development of the white racial body. Racial theism supported the development of eugenic ideas and practices by rooting providence within a hereditary conception of life that privileged the white racial body as a vehicle of socio-political advance.

The second chapter traces the development of modernism in the latter half of the nineteenth century through the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher. Like Bushnell, Beecher conceived piety in propagative terms and identified the advance of American national life with the hereditary development of the white racial body. Beecher, however, further developed modernism as a propagative faith by adapting it to the tenets of evolutionism. Unlike Bushnell, Beecher accepted the idea that humans had evolved from animals while he championed the notion that the destruction of unfitness enhanced human life. Redefining Christian redemption as a “great struggle of extrication,” Beecher believed that God sought to weed out degeneracy as part of his loving labor to draw out or “unfold” a higher spiritual nature in the race. Beecher promoted a racial theism that facilitated the rise of eugenic modes of discrimination in the latter half of the nineteenth century, believing that providence sought to advance American national life through the hereditary advancement of the white racial body.

The third chapter explores the intersections of Protestant modernism and the rise of eugenic ideas, practices, and policies at the turn of the twentieth century through the work of Newell Dwight Hillis. Hillis was an intellectual disciple of Beecher and the indirect heir of

Beecher's pulpit at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York. Hillis' work shows how modernism developed as part elite white Protestants' efforts to redefine and retool Christianity for an evolutionary struggle against degenerate elements of the American population. Hillis' work also demonstrates how modernism continued to socialize eugenic modes of discrimination through a discourse of racial theism that identified national stability and advance with the propagation of Anglo-American religious ideals. The chapter uses Hillis' writings to reflect upon the variability of racial theism as a modernist discourse.

Chapter four departs from the central narrative by considering modernism as a discourse of *evolutionary* –as opposed to *racial* –theism. Using archival research conducted at the University of Chicago Library, the chapter explores the work of Shailer Mathews, Dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago during the 1910 and '20s and one of the preeminent modernist theologians during the early twentieth century. Unlike Bushnell, Beecher, and Hillis, Mathews rejected the biological superiority of white America. He dismissed Anglo-America's sense of racial superiority as social prejudice. Yet Mathews endorsed eugenic practices and initiatives as part of his attempt to retool Christianity as a "religion of life." In Mathews' modernist vision, Christians out to cooperate with God in his evolutionary work to perfect human society, a cooperative endeavor that, according to Mathews, necessitated the eradication of human degeneracy.

The fifth chapter argues that mainline eugenics itself functioned as a discourse of racial theism. Drawing upon archival research in the Charles Davenport Papers, I use the writings and correspondence of one of America's most preeminent eugenicists to show how mainline eugenics was premised upon the idea that Anglo-America represented a providentially elect racial stock. A proud descendent of the puritan founder of New Haven, Connecticut, John

Davenport, and a man who was reared attending Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, Davenport saw eugenics as a way of protecting and strengthening the birthright of old stock America. An evolutionary biologist by training, Davenport was not religious in a traditional sense. Yet his science of the germ plasm perpetuated important theistic assumptions about the biopolitical destiny of New England, assumptions that were put into place by Bushnell and developed by Beecher. Davenport also encouraged modernists to help him promote mainline eugenic initiatives.

The final chapter draws upon archival research in the American Eugenics Society Papers to investigate the pro-eugenic sermons written and delivered for the American Eugenics Society (AES) in the late 1920s by modernist ministers like Kenneth C. MacArthur. The AES was a mainline eugenics organization that sought to ensure American national advance through race propagation. The AES staged sermon contests in its effort to cultivate partnership with churches. Rather than focusing on contest participants' willingness to engage science, the chapter instead explores how the interests of mainline eugenics and modernist churches overlapped through a shared commitment to viewing propagation as a divine method for ensuring socio-political progress. Conducting the first close analysis of the AES sermons as a modernist discourse, the chapter demonstrates how modernist churches helped to promote the mainline eugenic concept of "trusteeship," which referred to a modern reproductive morality aimed at preserving and enhancing the racial germ plasm.

The conclusion considers the decline of modernism and mainline eugenics in the 1930s and '40s. While eugenic ideas and practices did not disappear after World War II, the mainstream United States did witness the collapse of a theistic discourse that framed the political significance of reproduction in racial and evolutionary terms. After the Second World War,

Americans would stop speaking of propagation as a godly means to evolve a better race, even while eugenic modes of discrimination and eugenic policies nonetheless persisted.

As a note on organization, one will observe that each chapter advances a discussion about the development of modernism as a pro-eugenics discourse. Toward this end, I have chosen to include a discussion of the AES sermons in each of the chapters in order to underscore how the developments covered in each chapter led to modernists' vociferous public support for mainline eugenics during the teens and twenties, those years in which eugenics was most influential with respect to American social policy. This organization facilitates the development of my central question regarding how pro-eugenic modernist piety came to exist. Referencing sermons that demonstrate ministerial enthusiasm for twentieth century eugenics while conducting a genealogy of modernist religiosity allows one to mark important developments and continuities within the maturation of modernism as a pro-eugenic faith.

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the project thus far concerns the fact that it grossly underrepresents female voices. This is partly due to the fact that the discourse of Protestant modernism was dominated by elite white males. But the omission of female voices also speaks to an important assumption that has guided this work since nearly the beginning: theological modernism, as a discourse predominantly written by elite Anglo-American men, and Protestant domesticity, as a discourse predominantly written by elite Anglo-American women, were both justified by, and oriented towards, the same goal –namely, the propagation of a Christian society. In other words, as I see things, theological modernism and domesticity represent overlapping and complementary discourses. Hence, the entire project, as thus far conceived, presumes that nineteenth and early twentieth century Anglo-American Protestant women played a leading role in the formation of the modern home. I also assume that the theological ambitions of modernists

to reconceive God in propagative terms make little sense apart from this formation. In important ways, my intention has been to show how modernism, which has been understood as an intellectual discourse, plugged into and shaped the modern rationalization of the home as a propagative institution. In spite of these assumptions and whatever success achieved in accomplishing my intentions, however, more work needs to be done to flesh out the gendered complementarity between modernism and domesticity in defining the social function of the modern home. More female voices and greater attention to the masculine elements of modernism would greatly help in this respect.

Terminology

In this analysis, I make a general distinction between two kinds of modernists: *racial* theists and *evolutionary* theists. If the AES sermons are any indication of things, racial theists predominated throughout the development of modernism. The differences between these two kinds of modernists revolved around their differing conceptions of providence but also the specific eugenic initiatives they supported. In the early twentieth century, racial theists were more likely to emphasize mainline eugenic initiatives like immigration restriction and to support the eugenic regulation of reproductive sex out of a commitment to white racial hygiene. Evolutionary theists, on the other hand, saw eugenic initiatives as helpful in a broader human struggle against degeneracy.

Racial theists included modernists who were committed to reading God's evolutionary providence as the birthright of an elect American stock. Their brand of theism was tied up with white race nationalism and the idea that American religio-political ideals were the product of the unique hereditary endowment of old stock America. Racial theists promoted eugenics out of a sense of duty to protect and enhance what they saw as the essence of American national life: the

white racial body. Like evolutionary theists, racial theists read evolution in redemptive terms. Yet their vision of redemption saw the ethical and spiritual finality of evolution as a hierarchy of racial stocks with old stock America at the top. Racial theists clung tightly to racial immanentism, which, following Horace Bushnell, identified whiteness with divinity by believing that old stock America represented an elect and godly seed. I use the term racial theism to challenge the assumption that eugenic thought and practice developed along with the modern concept of race as a scientific category. In my narrative, the biological concept of race is preeminently a *theistic* category, with racial theism underscoring the idea that Anglo-American conceptions of providence suffused and supported hereditarian constructions of race.

Evolutionary theists included modernists who coupled a more liberal racial outlook with a theistic commitment to viewing evolution as a divine process or method for achieving socio-political progress. Shailer Mathews, for example, rejected white racial superiority as social conceit. He imagined evolution not as a process that inherently favored the propagation of allegedly more civilized races over supposedly more barbaric ones, but as a struggle that enjoined all races in the labor of procuring a higher spiritual nature. While Mathews rejected racial prejudice, however, he accepted hereditarianism and the concomitant notion that sinfulness could be propagated. Mathews' modernism testifies to the fact that while eugenics was not always racist it was always hereditarian, employing an understanding of life that saw human nature (and the body politic) as a developmental thing.

As I use it, the term white racial body denotes the notion that national religio-political ideals represented the unique inborn inheritance of Anglo-American stock. Used in conjunction with racial theism, the white racial body refers to a theistic concept of inborn providence. But it also underscores the technical element of control that characterizes eugenic thought: the

hereditarian idea that one could, via propagation, protect and augment the development of Anglo-American stock and thus American national life. Most importantly, however, the term is meant to capture a hereditarian way of thinking about race as a *common* life or body, that is, as a unique inborn vitality shared by white Americans, especially old stock whites. In this respect, it is intended to underscore how hereditarianism fostered a racialized way of thinking about biological life as something shared and also something to be collectively venerated and preserved.

CHAPTER 1: 'A GODLY SEED': HORACE BUSHNELL'S 'PROPAGATIVE' RELIGION

"Horace Bushnell taught us that 'the child ought to grow up a Christian and never having known himself to have been anything else than a Christian'. Just so. And this is none other than the thought and passion of those who are promoting the Science of Eugenics. Science is making righteousness possible and is teaching us that goodness is inherited, that a love of the true and beautiful and the good has been transmitted by devout parents who reverence God and who worshipped Him 'in Spirit and in truth' and 'in the beauty of holiness'."

-Anonymous Minister, AES Eugenic Sermon Contest, 1926

Introduction

Eugenics reminded a number of AES contest participants of Horace Bushnell's famous work, *Christian Nurture*. Bushnell, a prominent mid-nineteenth century Congregationalist minister who scholars cite as one of the most important early figures in the development of modernist Protestantism, sought to reconceive and retool middle-class New England piety for a rapidly expanding young nation. Redefining religious devotion through the hereditary register of race and the nurturing space of the domestic sphere, Bushnell famously argued in *Christian Nurture* that the task of the church was not to convert Christians but instead to *grow* them in the home. Bushnell insisted that the contemporary task of Christianity was to re-envision piety in terms of the "propagative" power of the Saxon body and the gradual perfection of this body through reproduction. Drawing upon a Lamarckian framework of heredity, Bushnell maintained that, through propagation, Saxon "stock" could become "truly sanctified,"¹ with fitness for family, church, and national life passing through the generations as a "natural gift or endowment."² In championing a partnership between the church and the eugenics movement,

¹ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861), 205.

some AES contest participants in the 1920s invoked Bushnell's work in order to argue that religion and eugenics had common aims, i.e., the propagation of a more righteous race. Like Bushnell, contest participants read racial development through the theistic lens of immanence, believing that God sought to build his kingdom on earth by propagating a race more naturally inclined to goodness.

In this chapter, I draw from Bushnell's work in order to trace the origins of modernist Protestantism as a practice of writing racial theism. As I demonstrate throughout the course of this dissertation, modernism helped to popularize eugenic ideas and practices across middle-class Anglo-America during the 1920s and '30s. Here, I show how this modernist habit of viewing God as immanent within the development of the white race emerged simultaneously with a new propagative view of Christianity. Bushnell was the earliest and most famous promoter of this new way of conceiving the purpose and function of religion, and I use his work to show how racial theism and propagative Christianity emerged together. More specifically, I argue that his propagative method for ensuring the growth of Christian civilization provided the template for modernist Protestant ministerial engagements with eugenics in the early twentieth century. Protestant ministers supported eugenics not simply as part of an intellectual labor to place religion on the firm footing of evolutionary science. Their support should not be understood as a capitulation to scientific authority, even though they clearly saw their support for eugenics as a part of their desire to see religion and evolution epistemologically unified within a common system. Much differently, their support emerged as an intrinsic part of their racialized understanding of Christianity itself, an understanding that is best characterized as propagative.

² Ibid., 202.

In the following section, I introduce Bushnell's propagative method and explore many of its distinctive features, including its prioritization of human physiology over scripture as the authoritative lens for interpreting providence and the consequences of this prioritization for racial thinking. In the second section, I discuss Bushnell's propagative theory of sin and its relation to his understanding of racial development. In the third section, I focus on Bushnell's concept of "sovereignty" to show how racial theism emerged with naturalistic understandings of race. In contrast to established narratives of the development of modernism, I argue that the modernist notion of racial immanence did not emerge with evolutionary thought per se but with naturalistic models of race development and a propagative understanding of religion. I conclude by briefly exploring the relationship between Bushnell's work and modernist support for eugenics in the early twentieth century.

Bushnell's 'Propagative' Method

Born on April 14, 1802, in Litchfield, Connecticut, Horace Bushnell was a prominent nineteenth century minister, public intellectual, and author. In 1831, Bushnell entered Yale Divinity School to pursue a career as a Congregationalist minister. Upon graduating, Bushnell became pastor at North Church in Hartford, Connecticut, where, as Glenn Hewitt narrates, he "remained for twenty-six years until ill health forced his early retirement."³ During his years at North Church and after his retirement in 1859, Bushnell wrote prolifically. His works include *God in Christ* (1849) and *Nature and the Supernatural* (1858), but his most influential, and certainly most controversial work was *Views of Christian Nurture*. Originally published with the Massachusetts Sabbath-School Society in 1847, Bushnell revised, expanded and republished the work in 1861 under the shortened title, *Christian Nurture*. As Phillip P. Eppard writes, the 1861

³ Glenn Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevin, and Horace Bushnell* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991), 126.

edition ultimately became the “accepted version.”⁴ In addition to Bushnell’s “Discourse on Language” that was published as part of *God in Christ*, William R. Hutchison cites *Christian Nurture* as one of the foundational texts for the development of a distinctly “modernist Protestant impulse.” Through its “environmental approach to religious nurture,” Hutchison argues, *Christian Nurture* “bolstered a growing confidence in the redemptive potentialities in the realm that had been known and feared as ‘the world’.”⁵

Bushnell’s purpose in *Christian Nurture* was to promote a new method for expanding Christendom, one that, he hoped, would surpass revivalism as the principal means for growing Christian civilization. Writing just after the period of revivalistic fervor that historians refer to as the “Great Awakening,” Bushnell sharply criticized the turbulent spirit of conquest that he believed animated revivals. In contrast, Bushnell outlined a method of Christian expansion that sought to harness the nurturing power of the Christian home in order to rear Christians from birth. In the earliest version of his work, Bushnell took aim at those who privileged the revival system as a means of growth by famously declaring that the child ought to grow up a Christian:

...the aim, effort and expectation should be, not, as is commonly assumed, that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time when he went through a technical experience, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.”⁶

In contradistinction to what he considered to be the mechanical approach of revivalists, Bushnell argued that Christians could be “propagated,” a term that Bushnell used to refer to the

⁴ Philip B. Eppard, introduction to *Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto* (1847), Horace Bushnell (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), vi.

⁵ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 47.

⁶ Horace Bushnell, *Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto* (Delmar, NY: Scholar’s Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975 [1847]), 6.

idea that the righteousness of Christian parents could be infused organically into the development of the child. Propagation, in other words, referred to the idea that the “Christian life and spirit of the parents shall flow into the mind of the child, to blend with his incipient and half-formed exercises” and, therefore, the notion that parents could thus “beget their own good” within their offspring, with “their thoughts, opinions, faith and love” becoming more and more a part of the child’s “own separate exercise.”⁷ But the notion of propagation also referred to the idea that the organic influence of the parents would be hereditarily transmitted, influencing the development of future generations. In the 1861 edition of his work, Bushnell thus cited a “very important fact in human physiology,” namely that “qualities of education, habit, feeling, and character, have a tendency always to grow in, by long continuance, and become thoroughly inbred in the stock.”⁸ As both meanings of propagation suggest, Bushnell’s method of Christian nurture was decidedly naturalistic, with Bushnell drawing inspiration from sciences like physiology and botany to reimagine Christianity as an organic, life-giving force and, thereby, to distinguish his system from what he viewed as the overly technical approach of the revivalists.

Bushnell’s notion of propagation grounded an early iteration of American race nationalism, with propagation specifically seeking to harness the “potent and prolific energy of Saxon life.”⁹ In the edition of *Christian Nurture* that he published with the Massachusetts Sabbath-School Society in October 1847, Bushnell included an essay entitled, “Growth, Not Conquest, the True Method of Christian Progress,” a discourse that originally appeared in an

⁷ Ibid., 21. In another passage, Bushnell described propagation as a process by which the “parental life” flows into the child “just as naturally, and by a law as truly organic, as when the sap of the trunk flows into a limb.” Ibid., 19.

⁸ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 202.

⁹ Bushnell, *Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto*, 149.

1844 volume of *The New Englander* under the title, “The Kingdom of Heaven as a Grain of Mustard Seed.”¹⁰ In this essay, Bushnell argued that the “true increase of a nation is not that which is made by conquest and plunder,” activities that he associated with revivalism, but “that which is the simple development of its vital and prolific forms.” After asserting this, Bushnell immediately began to narrate the story of the pilgrims and puritans who brought the “germ of a great nation” to Massachusetts’ shores, a germ that, through propagation, proliferated and eventually blossomed into the republic. Bushnell’s propagative method was thus a formalization of what he viewed to be the natural mode of New England’s growth, one that abided by the natural “laws of population” and one that had transformed a “few thousand men” into the wealthiest, freest, most powerful stock on the North American continent. Moreover, the naturalness of propagation made it inherently peaceful, providing the basis for national unity and civil prosperity, while also making propagation the truly legitimate method for expanding Christendom.¹¹ Speaking inclusively as a scion of New England, Bushnell wrote, “We have made no conquests. We have only unfolded our original germ, the mustard seed of our first colonization. There is no other kind of national advancement which is legitimate or safe. The civil order must grow as a creature of life, and unfold itself from within.”¹²

As his concern for unfolding the Saxon “germ” suggests, Bushnell’s notion of propagation was built upon a physiological understanding of race. For Bushnell, race referred to

¹⁰ Ibid., 147.

¹¹ Reginald Horsman locates the import of Horace Bushnell’s work in the development of Manifest Destiny as an ideology of Anglo-Saxon race nationalism. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 209.

¹² Bushnell, *Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto*, 149.

a reproductive unity, an idea that he clearly expressed in his repeated use of the term “stock” –as in Puritan, Saxon, or New England *stock*. His notion of propagation thus underscored the hereditary idea that, through human reproduction, “whole races of men are cultivated into properties that are peculiar.”¹³ Of course, by propagation Bushnell did not simply mean sex. But his entire plan did hinge upon the hereditary idea that qualities and dispositions were transmitted from one generation to the next through procreation and that such transmission influenced the development of distinct races.

Hence, in the 1861 edition of his work Bushnell asked his readers to consider the physiological fact that “education, habit, feeling, and character” become inbred in racial stocks.¹⁴ Bushnell plainly stated the import of such a physiological fact for the development of allegedly inferior races: “That which is inculcated by practice passes into tendency, and descends as a natural gift or endowment. The same thing is observable, on a large scale, in the families of mankind. A savage race is bred into low living, and a faithless, bloody character.”¹⁵

Bushnell’s emphasis on character as a racial characteristic underscores the important idea that, for him, physiology explained not only the physical differences between inferior and superior races but also mental and spiritual ones as well. Thus, Bushnell argued that there was a direct correlation between the physical development of a particular race and its moral and spiritual capacities. After asking whether “souls” and “spiritual natures come into being through propagation” or through the “immediate inbreathing of God,” Bushnell averred, “...the outward man is [in either case] a fit organ for the person within. The dispositions, tempers, capacities –the

¹³ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

natural, and, to a great extent, the moral character, have the outward frame, as a fit organ of use and expression.”¹⁶

It is significant that Bushnell appealed to physiology and not scripture in justifying his notion of propagation and, furthermore, his views on racial differences. As scholars have demonstrated, his appeal to physiology and other naturalist paradigms established the precedent followed by modernists who sought to reconcile religious thought and practice with scientific knowledge. Yet scholarship on Bushnell frequently overlooks the fact that his propagative method revolved not simply around human physiology, but, more specifically, around the idea of heredity. It is certainly true that the novelty of *Christian Nurture* lay in its argument that Christians were to be grown and not converted as scholars have insisted; and it is moreover correct that Bushnell built his method upon what was for him the scientific verity of human physiological development. But *Christian Nurture* did not have the development of Christian children as its final objective as is commonly assumed. Its underlying aim was, to use Bushnell’s terms, the production of a “godly seed.” Nurturing children in righteousness was important precisely because it allowed one to further the development of Saxon stock. In short, Christian nurture was a means to an end, i.e., the propagation of an inherently righteous race.

Anne M. Boylan, for example, identifies Bushnell as a key figure in the ascendance of the American Sunday school and thus the rise of a more developmental approach to human redemption that revolved around the then emerging concept of “childhood.”¹⁷ In promoting the

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷ In a 1979 article in *Church History*, Boylan insists that the transformation of the United States from an agricultural to industrial nation changed the expectations for, and perceptions of, children in the family. Within such a socio-economic transformation, “childhood for middle class children acquired its modern shape as a period of preparation, ostensibly free of adult cares.”

idea that the natures of children are plastic and therefore susceptible to the molding influence of family life, Boylan argues that Bushnell played a vital role in the introduction of Christian education as an approach that gradually came to rival, if never outmode, conversion as a means of growing Christian civilization.¹⁸ Boylan's analysis represents an established body of scholarship in American religious history that has come to see Bushnell as a founding figure of Protestant liberalism. *Christian Nurture*, it is commonly assumed, played a key role in loosening the hold of Calvinist doctrine by aligning religious thought with developmental understandings of human life.¹⁹ Yet historians of Protestant liberalism neglect to mention that Bushnell's entire propagative method revolved not around the issue of Christian education per se but around propagating Saxon stock. For Bushnell, education was important only in so far as it allowed one to further develop races, while propagation, which included the practice of education, did not have the salvation of children as its ultimate objective, but rather, the hereditary development and territorial expansion of Saxon germ. To invoke the scientific idiom that would come to support eugenic thought and practice during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Bushnell was concerned with ontogeny first and phylogeny second. Thus, Bushnell emphasized that propagation involved not only harnessing environmental forces but germinal ones as well: "By a kind of ante-natal and post-natal nurture combined," he declared, "the new born

Anne M. Boylan, "Sunday Schools and Changing Evangelical Views of Children in the 1820s," *Church History*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sep., 1979), 321.

¹⁸ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 149.

¹⁹ Importantly, Boylan argues that it is "erroneous to assume that Christian nurture quickly displaced conversion as the main goal of Sunday school instruction. The two goals existed side by side for some time and many religious educators remained profoundly skeptical of the implications of Christian nurture theory. Thus, one could read articles [in Sunday school magazines and journals] stressing conversion over nurture in the same publication." Ibid.

generations will be started into Christian piety, and the world itself over-populated and taken possession of by a truly sanctified stock.”²⁰

The Hereditary Effects of Sin: Bushnell on the Propagation of Human Races

Bushnell’s propagative plan revolved around a Lamarckian-inspired theory of inheritance. In the early nineteenth century, Jean Baptiste-Lamarck published a theory of species development premised upon the hereditary idea that acquired characteristics were passed on from one generation to the next. Over the course of the mid-nineteenth century, Bushnell adapted Lamarckian premises to develop his notion of propagation, with Bushnell grounding the latter in a much more explicitly hereditary framework in the 1861 edition of his work. Bushnell, who was decidedly less concerned with revivalism in this later edition, argued that righteousness could become inborn over the course of several generations. With the “familiar laws of physiology set before us,” Bushnell wrote, it is unreasonable to doubt that, “where there is a long line of godly fathers and mothers, kept up in a regular succession for many generations, a religious temperament may at length be produced, that is more in the power of conscience, less wayward as regards the principles of integrity, and more pliant to the Christian motives.”²¹ Bushnell did not refrain from arguing that, by influencing human heredity through religious nurture, one was adopting an approach that one would ordinarily employ in breeding animals. It is “well understood that qualities received by training, and *not* themselves natural, do also pass by transmission. It is said, for example, that the dog used in hunting was originally trained by great

²⁰ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 205.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

care and effort, and that now almost no training is necessary; for the artificial quality has become [...] natural in the stock.”²²

If Bushnell believed that, like animals, humans were subject to natural laws of development, he nonetheless maintained an ontological distinction between humans and other species. Here, Bushnell also followed Lamarck, who, as part of his hereditary paradigm, advanced a theory referred to as the “Developmental Hypothesis.” Lamarck believed that species adapted to their environments and that they were therefore hereditarily mutable. However, as Ladelle McWhorter argues in her genealogy of modern racism, although Lamarck “believed in the transformation of species,” he “conceived of it ‘only upon the basis of ontological continuity, which was that of Classical natural history’.” In other words, unlike later proponents of evolution who argued that entirely new species developed from older ones, Lamarck “‘presupposed a progressive gradation” or an “unbroken process of improvement.”²³ For Bushnell, who read Lamarck with eyes to his own theory, this meant that the hereditary improvement of the race necessarily implied its gradual moral and spiritual perfection. It also allowed him to insist upon the development of species as an organic process while simultaneously maintaining that, unlike animals, humans were ontologically special and God-like.

The direct influence of Lamarck’s Developmental Hypothesis on Bushnell’s thinking is readily apparent in his 1859 work, *Nature and the Supernatural*. There, Bushnell outlined a scheme of creation that was decidedly developmental, with “man” appearing as the “last and most perfect of all living forms.”²⁴ In outlining his view, Bushnell rejected evolutionary premises

²² Ibid., 98. Italics in the original.

²³ Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 99.

that would come to be associated with Darwinism, confirming his commitment to a view of species development that one might call proto-evolutionary.

For example, Bushnell reflected upon two evolutionary theories that were gaining prominence at the time, both of which were premised upon the continuity and adaptability of species' through reproduction. The first propounded that there was "a slow process of advance in order, through which the lowest forms of life gradually develop those which are higher and more perfect, and finally culminate in man." The second appealed to a "vital power" in all organisms, "by which, at distant but proper intervals," they develop into "higher" and necessarily distinct organisms. As Bushnell explained, "In one view the progress is a regular gradation; in the other it is a progress by leaps or stages."²⁵ Bushnell ultimately rejected both theses on similar grounds. In response to the former, Bushnell wrote, "All the orders, and genera, and species, maintain their immovable distinctions; and no trace can be discovered, whether there or in the now living races, of organic forms that are intermediate and transitional." In response to the latter, Bushnell declared, "There neither is nor can be any middle position between humanity and no humanity."²⁶ "Any theory [...] which throws a human child on the care of an animal parentage is too nearly absurd to require refutation."²⁷ This led Bushnell to endorse a view of creationism in which a "power out of nature and above it" acted upon the natural order to create "successive races of living forms,"²⁸ a view which allowed him to reconcile three ideas that were

²⁴ Horace Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural as Together Constituting the One System of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895 [1859]), 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

key to his thinking: a notion of propagation as a means of species development, a habit of seeing humankind as a special creation, and a commitment to a supernatural view of God.

Bushnell thus rejected the Darwinian notion that species developed from other species, while at the same time affirming the idea that species adapt through propagation. But Bushnell's notion of propagation was able to accomplish something else that would prove fundamental to the development of modernist Protestantism: he created and promoted a naturalistic understanding of sin. For Bushnell, sin was a physiological power, one of "bodily disturbance, shattering the nerves, inflaming the tissues, distempering the secretions, and brewing a general ferment of disease." As a physiological power, sin was hereditarily transmitted. Or in Bushnell's idiom, sin was propagated, producing not only what Bushnell referred to as the "organic deprivation of humanity" but what was the same thing, "conditions of hereditary damage."²⁹ In this way, Bushnell wrote, "The line of propagation is [...] the line of transmission by which evil passes."³⁰ In effect, Bushnell translated the Reformed doctrine of human depravity into a physiological idiom of inheritance. "The doctrine of physiology," Bushnell argued, "is the doctrine of original sin, and we are held to inevitable orthodoxy by it, even if the scriptures are cast away."³¹

Bushnell, who made a habit of qualifying his arguments, was careful to assert that the development of righteousness through propagation did not obviate personal struggle with evil and thus the Reformed idea that regeneration entailed a personal conflict with one's fallen

²⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁹ Ibid., 178.

³⁰ Ibid., 184.

³¹ Ibid., 178.

nature. As he wrote in his 1861 edition of *Christian Nurture*, “The growth of Christian virtue is no vegetable process, no mere onward development. It involves a struggle with evil, a fall and a rescue.”³² Moreover, Bushnell insisted that the propagative power of goodness did not obsolesce human dependence upon God to know what was right and to follow him in choosing it. The very idea of propagation meant that human corruption was as intransigent as it was physiologically innate. Thus, Bushnell argued that if Christianity proclaimed “the fact of a properly supernatural power in man,”³³ it also declared that man “has no ability, in himself and merely acting in himself, to become right and perfect.”³⁴ In making these assertions, Bushnell was insisting that propagation did not undermine the redemptive message of Christianity and the truth the latter revealed about human nature. In fact, propagation confirmed Christian truth. If, through propagation, one could alleviate human struggle with evil by strengthening the will, one could not, at least never completely, eliminate sinfulness.

The propagative nature of sin made it consequential with respect to Bushnell’s understanding of race and its relationship to the development of the species. While Bushnell maintained that all human races comprised the “genus humanity” and formed a “religious unity,”³⁵ he subscribed to a polygenetic view of human origins, believing that the various races of mankind had been created separately. The real differences between the races, however, emerged not with their original creation, but through their subsequent propagation and through the propagative consequences that their sinfulness had upon their mental and moral development.

³² Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 23-24.

³³ Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

Supposing that each race had been created separately as an original pair (or as several original pairs) and arguing that each original pair had sinned, Bushnell concluded that the “descendants of the sinning pair, or pairs, born of natures thrown out of harmony and corrupted by sin, could not, on principles of physiology, apart from scripture teachings, be unaffected by the distempers of their parentage. They must have been constitutionally injured or deprived [sic].”³⁶ In short, the supposed moral, mental, or to use a word that was commonly associated with whiteness during the nineteenth century, *spiritual* differences between the races was caused by their relative sinfulness. Of course, the Saxons comprised the most spiritual race in Bushnell’s mind, while his entire method was designed to increase its spiritual inheritance and expand its dominion.

In the next section, I reflect further on the relationship between race and sinfulness through Bushnell’s notion of sovereignty. Here, I want to focus briefly on the cosmological significance of Bushnell’s propagative method. In both *Nature and the Supernatural* and in his 1861 edition of *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell insisted that God’s entire plan of redemption for the human race was the production of a “moral population.”³⁷ As he put it in *Christian Nurture*, God was, “from the first, looking for a godly seed,” establishing his kingdom on earth by “inserting such laws of population that piety itself shall finally over-populate the world.”³⁸ For these reasons, Bushnell called propagation an “ancient method” and referred to it as the true mode of salvation. Of course, these claims appeared extravagant to many of Bushnell contemporaries. And yet his method constitutes an early expression of a tendency that would come to define the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 181.

³⁸ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 195.

modernist practice of writing racial ontologies of the divine, namely, the habit of identifying the immanence of God and the earthly advance of his kingdom with the development of the white racial body. This same tendency animated many modernist Protestants during the early twentieth century who saw eugenics as a way of transforming race hygiene into a kind of domestic devotion.

‘Sovereignty’: Bushnell and the Origins of Racial Theism

In *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, William R. Hutchison follows Kenneth Caughen in distinguishing between the emergence of “evangelical liberals” and “modernistic liberals” during the nineteenth century. The former refer to those who “made the Christian revelation normative and then merely interpreted it in the light of modern knowledge,” while the latter denotes a person who made “modern science his criterion and then, in a kind of afterthought, retained what he could of the Christian tradition.”³⁹ It is this distinction that makes Bushnell such a key figure for Hutchison’s history of modernism, for Bushnell provided the template for what would become the controlling theological principle for the modernist position: the notion of *immanentism*. The latter refers to the idea that “God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it,” and it grounded the modernist practice of adapting Christianity to the revelations of science. If eighteenth and nineteenth century natural philosophers assumed that history was inherently progressive, modernist Protestants in the United States sought to supply such a liberal outlook with a religious underpinning by seeing the divine at work in the march of history and the advance of scientific knowledge. Hutchison argues

³⁹ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse*, 7.

that Bushnell did more than any other American figure to “lay the foundation of cultural immanentism” and thus to inaugurate this perspective.⁴⁰

The impact of Bushnell’s work on the development of modernism, however, needs to be revisited in light of modernist engagements with eugenic thought and practice in the early twentieth century. Adapting Hutchison’s idiom, I argue that what Bushnell initiated is best described not as cultural immanentism but *racial* immanentism. In other words, Bushnell inaugurated a modernist habit of integrating the natural and the supernatural within the white racial body. Hutchison, who has written what remains the definitive work on modernism, argues that Bushnell’s scientific views would be obsolesced by the rise of Darwinism in the late nineteenth century, citing this as evidence that Bushnell’s influence on modernism was not specifically in the realm of science but in the broad contributions that he made toward opening religious sentiment to the “redemptive potentialities” of the “the world.”⁴¹ This is why Hutchison describes Bushnell as inaugurating a general shift toward cultural immanentism rather than an understanding of immanence specifically grounded in naturalism. But Hutchison does not see that the precedent for modernists’ habit of engaging evolutionary science emerged not with the specific epistemological claims made by Darwin (or with the notion of evolution per se), but with physiological, or *hereditarily developmental*, conceptions of race. The practice of writing racial theism began with the idea that there was, in developmental terms, a kind of incipient divinity within the white racial body and, moreover, that this divinity could be enhanced through the propagative devotion of domestic piety. In this section, I elaborate this point by focusing on

⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁴¹ Ibid., 47.

Bushnell's notion of "sovereignty" as he developed it in both *Christian Nurture* and *Nature and the Supernatural*.

Historians have often remarked about how unsystematic Bushnell was in his thinking, taking the wide variety of subjects about which he wrote as evidence that he was a religious leader who was more concerned about addressing the practical problems of churches than he was about formal theology. For these reasons, historians rarely attempt to read *Nature and the Supernatural* and the 1861 edition of *Christian Nurture* as constituting exercises in racial theology. And yet both works are built upon the same theistic premise: God's redemptive plan for the human race is developmental in both purpose and design. If, in *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell outlined his notion of propagation, in *Nature and the Supernatural* Bushnell focused on reconciling the naturalistic fact of human physiological existence, on the one hand, and the religious fact of the human soul, on the other. His driving question in *Nature and the Supernatural* might be put as follows: What is the relationship between propagation, which is clearly an immanent process, and the human soul, which is obviously a transcendent and originative power? Or as Bushnell would pose the query, how can we "find a legitimate place for the supernatural" within the natural order? The book thus sets out to reconcile naturalism and religion, a difficulty that Bushnell resolved by identifying the supernatural with the sovereignty of the human will while at the same time arguing that the human will was subject to natural laws of development. It was this paradoxical resolution, I argue, that constituted the earliest statement of racial theism.

In *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell argued that the human will was subject to the laws of propagation, which meant that it was the product of parental nurture and conditioned by the hereditary endowment of the child. Bushnell described the formation of the will as a gradual

“process of separation,” whereby the “will and character” of the child gradually emerged from the “matrix” of the parents’ “will and character.” Through this process, Bushnell wrote, the child “approaches more and more closely, and by gradual process, to the proper rank and responsibility of an individual creature [until] at last he comes forth to act his part in such color of evil, and why not of good, as he has derived from [his parents].”⁴² Bushnell famously drew upon this scheme to argue that the will and, therefore, human individuality were categorically of a mixed nature, with the notion of a “pure, separate, individual man, living *wholly* within, and from himself” constituting a “mere fiction.”⁴³ Later on, Bushnell strove for a more qualified position in expressing this idea: “To a certain extent and for certain purposes, we are individuals, acting each from his own will. Then to a certain extent and for certain other purposes, we are parts of or members of a common body, as truly as limbs of a tree.”⁴⁴ The propagated, common nature of the will meant that it was a product of racial development. In *Nature and the Supernatural*, Bushnell argued that the child receives from the parents “their embrace, circulates their blood, [bears] their name, and is looked upon, even by their selfishness, as multiplied and dearer self.”⁴⁵ In other words, to say that the will was part of a common body was to say that, like “blood,” it could be racially propagated as a hereditary endowment.

But if the will developed organically through the laws of propagation, it ultimately came to rise of above the natural order, demonstrating a position of height and superordination that Bushnell referred to as “sovereignty.” Born of natural development, the will was, in the end,

⁴² Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁵ Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 181.

“supernatural,” which simply meant that the will was “not in the chain of natural cause and effect.” Defining the supernatural not as a mysterious or miraculous power but simply as that which “acts on the chain of cause and effect, in nature, from without the chain,”⁴⁶ Bushnell described the will as being both within and above the natural order. The will emerged out of and over the natural order as the child developed a love for authority, truth, justice, and beauty, a love that became more complete through the process of separation described above. Developing within the parental matrix, the will acquired its sovereignty as the child gradually learned the difference between right and wrong and came to love the good for its own sake. With the child slowly overcoming his or her selfishness, his or her will came to seek the good not out of self-interest but out of a genuine love for what was right. In other words, the will acquired sovereignty, achieving a degree of transcendence over the natural order in being able to direct action not through the promise of reward but through an earnest desire to serve God and an artless love for his commandments. Through sovereignty, therefore, Bushnell conveyed the idea that man is a supernatural being, ontologically distinct from animals and sharing in the divine life in so far as he possesses the power to resist base impulses and choose to do God’s will.

Bushnell imagined the will as a force, while, to use his gendered idiom, he defined “man” in terms of sovereignty. To be a “man” was to act as an “original power,” which meant that man acted “not in the line of causality, but from himself.” And yet, however originaive a power, the will was conditioned by the organismic faculties of the body, and this meant that man’s sovereignty was “partial.” Bushnell wrote, “[Man] is not independent of nature in the sense of being separated from it in his action, but he is in it, environed by it, acting through it, partially sovereign over it, always sovereign as regards his self-determination and not completely

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

sovereign as regards executing all that he wills in it.” For Bushnell, the sovereignty of man’s will was conditional because certain “departments” of the human soul were “dominated [...] by the laws of cause and effect.” Faculties of the soul such as memory, appetite, passion, attention, imagination, association, and disposition were “partly governed by their own laws” so that when a man attempts to “exercise any control over them, or turn them about to serve his purpose” he can only do it “in a qualified sense and degree.”⁴⁷ To be a man was thus to be both within nature and without, natural and supernatural, subject to natural laws of development while at the same time rising above them through a relationship of height and superordination. As Bushnell succinctly put it, men “live in nature and are of it, up to the point of their will, but there they emerge into qualified sovereignty.”⁴⁸

Historians of American religious history sometimes downplay the influence that naturalism had upon Bushnell’s thinking. Glenn Hewitt, for example, argues that it would be a mistake to “classify Bushnell under naturalism.” “While inclined to an early version of naturalism,” Hewitt writes, “Bushnell also continued to assert the necessity of the supernatural.”⁴⁹ Such a position is supported by Bushnell’s work. In *Nature and the Supernatural*, for example, Bushnell declared, “[T]he Christianity that is becoming a part of only nature, or is classified under nature, is Christianity extinct.”⁵⁰

In spite of conclusions drawn by historians and despite his own assurances, it is surprising how much power Bushnell’s notion of sovereignty conceded to natural laws of human

⁴⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁹ Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality*, 128.

⁵⁰ Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 21.

development. In the same work in which he warned Christians against the danger of naturalism, Bushnell matter-of-factly observed that the development of the human capacity for goodness is “under physiological and cerebral limitations.” Using a naturalistic model for explaining why some people were more pious than others, Bushnell described several different bodily constraints that limited the development of the will. In each case, Bushnell conceived the body as a physiological entity, with the body imposing conditions that restricted sovereignty, or as Bushnell also put it, that reduced one’s “capacity of doing or becoming.”⁵¹ Bushnell offered a tripartite paradigm for categorizing these limitations. The first and most severe were limits of “organization,” or impairments that systemically affected the constitution of the body. The second and less critical were the limits imposed by education (or lack thereof). The final and least restrictive category included those of an environmental nature. Bushnell suggested that these three categories formed a scale, with organizational impediments often reducing “the will to nothing, as in some idiots” and thus constituting the “zero” position on the register. From there, the scale of limits became less imposing, moving upwards “by slight gradations” to educational and environmental conditions.⁵²

Keeping with his propagative method, Bushnell argued that physiological limits to sovereignty originated with sin. In a cyclical fashion, however, he also asserted that sovereignty, the prerequisite for free will, introduced sin into the world. Sin was a physical condition, a “general disturbance or collapse of nature” that upset the inherent and original harmony of the natural order.⁵³ Sin was, in other words, a “violation of nature” that introduced the unnatural

⁵¹ Ibid., 51-52.

⁵² Ibid., 53.

⁵³ Ibid., 140.

“results of pain, disorder and death.”⁵⁴ Bushnell used an anatomical example to illustrate this point: sin falls into nature “as a grain of sand into an eye –and as the eye is the same organ as it was before, having the same laws, and is yet so far changed as to be an organ of pain rather than of sight, so it is with the laws of nature, in the penal and retributive action now begun.”⁵⁵ Like a grain of sand falling into an eye, humans introduced sin into the world by choosing to do wrong, with their choices ultimately disrupting the laws of nature. In other words, sin was an originaive force like the will from which it issued, capable of producing a “new evolution of activities” in the natural order as sin became propagated.

Technically speaking, sin was not inherited; rather sin produced an organizational taint or weakness in offspring that left them enfeebled in their struggle with evil and prone to more sinfulness.⁵⁶ And this is precisely how Bushnell explained the development of races. Through the propagative nature of sin, physiologically distinct races emerged, and this meant that different races displayed varying degrees of sovereignty. Bushnell explained it in the following way:

It is important [...] considering the moral reactions of the body, and especially the great fact of a propagation of a species, to notice the disorganizing effects of sin, in the body. Body and soul, as long as they subsist in their organized state, are a strict unity. The abuses of one are abuses also of the other, the disturbances and diseases of one disturb and disease the other.⁵⁷

In establishing a propagative relation between sin and the physical impairment of the body, Bushnell in effect transformed righteousness into a measure of racial development, and vice

⁵⁴ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁶ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 23-24. Bushnell also wrote, “The declarations of scripture, and the laws of physiology [...] compel the belief that the child is somehow depraved by descent from parents, who are under the corrupting effects of sin.” Ibid., 27.

⁵⁷ Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 174.

versa. As already discussed, the propagative power of sin allowed Bushnell to interpret racial differences through a religious ontology. In Bushnell's view, God created the races with the hope of propagating a godly seed. With the notion of sovereignty more specifically, Bushnell further advanced this religio-racial ontology by providing a more nuanced consideration of the immanent relationship between racial identity and providence, body and soul, nature and supernatural. For the twenty-first century reader, the notion of sovereignty stamps Bushnell's method as a religiously inflected iteration of modern racism. But it also demonstrates that the scientific racism that was then gaining ground in the United States and that would rise to prominence with theological renderings of Darwinism and eugenic thought in the late nineteenth century was, from the beginning, a theistic discourse disseminated by American Protestant leaders.

Bushnell's concept of sovereignty testifies to the fact that, as Joshua Paddison argues in *American Heathens*, "In the nineteenth century United States, religion and race were mutually constitutive systems, at times blending, at times conflicting, each capable of acting as a metalanguage for the other." Paddison's work focuses on Reconstruction in California, but his conclusion that "Americans debated issues of race within the idiom of Christianity" is generalizable for the country as a whole during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁸ Applying Paddison's conclusions to Bushnell's work, one will notice that sovereignty was not simply modern racism dressed in religious garb, as if beneath its gilded layers of theism one would find a racist core. Its theistic import was central to what the term "race" meant to American Protestants like Bushnell. To be white, or in Bushnell's case, to be of Saxon stock, was to be divine, or at least, divine-like. Of course, in Bushnell's thinking one was sovereign

⁵⁸ Joshua Paddison, *American Heathens: Religion, Race, and Reconstruction in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 9.

regardless of one's particular race; sovereignty was the human condition, humanity's ontological distinction from the rest of nature. All races, to some extent or another, were both immanent and transcendent, within nature and above it. But not all races were sovereign to the extent that the Saxon was sovereign, as the Saxon possessed an innate height or transcendence over the natural order that other races could not achieve. The sovereignty of the Saxon testified to a special development, a propagated election, a historically peculiar endowment of providence, a godly seed. Therefore, if sovereignty exemplifies the theistic import of modern racism in the United States, it moreover indicates that the modernist notion of immanentism emerged not with the idea that God worked through human cultural development and that he would be revealed through it. More specifically, immanentism emerged along with theistic ideas that tied the concept of racial development together with providence and national advance.

Bushnell's Impact on Protestant Modernism

Bushnell set three overlapping precedents with respect to the development of modernism as a discourse of racial theism. The first was *practical* and involved the reproductive space of the home; the second was *developmental* and associated sinfulness with racial inferiority; while the third might be described as *biopolitical* in so far as it identified the reproduction and gradual perfection of the white racial body with the advance of God's kingdom on earth. The impact of Bushnell's method on modernist Protestantism, therefore, should be assessed in terms of its influence upon the formation of three discursive tendencies that came to characterize the modernist position: 1) its gendered habit of identifying the purpose of religious practice with the propagative power of the Christian home; its tendency to see an isomorphic relationship between sinfulness and the evolutionary advance of stocks and races; and 3) its readiness to conflate providence, the perpetuity of Christian civilization, and the hereditary development (or

evolution) of the white racial body. Bushnell demonstrates that these three modernist motifs – propagation, sin as devolution, and racial theism –emerged together and supported one another.

The various positions that modernist ministers took on eugenics would largely be hammered out through debates that were shaped by these three discursive tendencies. Indeed, a close read of Bushnell’s work suggests that eugenic thought and in the United States did not emerge with science *per se* but with a whole new propagative way of conceiving religion itself. Participants in the AES sermon contests harkened back to Bushnell, either explicitly, by citing his propagative method as a precedent for forging a partnership between the churches and the eugenics movement, or implicitly, by reminding their audiences that propagation was already a Christian method of growth. To conclude this chapter, I would like to take a closer look at this point.

In *Nature and the Supernatural*, Bushnell declared, “Christianity is the natural foster mother of science, and science the certain *handmaid* of Christianity. And both together, when rightly conceived, must complete one system of knowledge.”⁵⁹ For Bushnell, the unity of science and religion was properly conceived in terms of propagation. Dr. William E. Griffin, a minister who delivered a sermon for the American Eugenics Society in 1926, echoed Bushnell. From the pulpit at Jethro Memorial Presbyterian Church in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Rev. Griffin averred, “Science in this particular field is not [a] stranger to religion, but her handmaid and daughter, and forever one and inseparable.” By “this particular field,” Rev. Griffin was referring to eugenic activities related to marriage, mate selection, and childrearing. In other words, like Bushnell, Rev. Griffin argued that the unity of science and religion was race propagation, a viewpoint that the minister later confirmed by insisting that the “most fundamental” problem for

⁵⁹ Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 19.

society, and the problem that brought the church and eugenics together, was the “problem of marriage and parenthood” as they related to the “perpetuation of the race.”⁶⁰ Of course, Rev. Griffin’s understanding of propagation was different than Bushnell’s, involving a eugenic emphasis on mate selection and not simply childrearing. But the minister nonetheless expected his congregants to agree with him in arguing that the social authority of the church was fundamentally of a propagative nature. Perhaps many also followed him in accepting the idea that this authority made the church and eugenics natural allies.

Analyses of religious engagements with eugenics often emphasize the rising authority of science during the early twentieth century as one of the primary reasons for the appeal of eugenics among clergymen. Although I do not wish to dispute this thesis, it nonetheless deserves qualification. In the first case, historians of eugenics frequently overlook the fact that, as Amy Laura Hall demonstrates (albeit using different terminology), one of the primary ways in which American mainline Protestant denominations expressed their social power during the twentieth century was through their sense of duty and service as propagative institutions.⁶¹ Twentieth century mainline Protestant churches largely defined their social function in terms of their authority over hearth and home, a biopolitical function that emerged in the nineteenth century as part of broader modernizing patterns in which churches came to privilege the developmental sphere of the home. This allows one to see that, in the second case, Protestant churches’ endorsement of eugenics was never simply about capitulating to the growing authority of science but about continuing patterns of religious authority that began to emerge during Bushnell’s era,

⁶⁰ “Griffin, William E,” Philadelphia, PA: American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society Library.

⁶¹ Amy Laura Hall, *Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

patterns that his propagative method reflected and even furthered. Thus, Protestant ministers like Rev. Griffin endorsed eugenics from a position of confidence and authority in so far as mainline Protestant churches had come to define their social power in biopolitical terms, that is, through the propagative influence of the household. Although pro-eugenic ministers certainly recognized the rising authority of science in organizing American life during the early twentieth century and although they may have even believed that this authority came somewhat at the expense of the churches' own, they nonetheless had every confidence to see their support for eugenics not as a capitulation to scientific authority but as an organic part of their religious commitment to growing a better body politic.

CHAPTER 2: THE HUMAN ANIMAL: HENRY WARD BEECHER'S 'GREAT STRUGGLE OF EXTRICATION

“Henry Ward Beecher is said to have told Newell Dwight Hillis when the latter was starting out to preach, to study the horses in a community first instead of the people. He said, ‘If they have fine, spick and span horses, these people have high ideals and you can do them a lot of good. But if they have poor, broken-down, half-starved, low-bred horses, get out of there. You can’t save these people’s souls because they have no soul to save.’”

-Anonymous Minister, AES Eugenic Sermon Contest, 1926

Introduction

In a sermon that he preached at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, on Sunday morning, April 8, 1883, Henry Ward Beecher asked his congregants to take the “larger view” of human life and observe “that struggle which has been running on through thousands of years, and very likely will run on thousands of years to come.” Beecher challenged his congregation to take an evolutionary view of the work of providence, describing the human race’s evolutionary struggle against its animal nature as an upward process towards a more divine like nature. Evolution, Beecher averred, “is a struggle which has an inevitable termination –namely, in such an exaltation of the race that all those animal elements will finally be purged out of it, and a larger intelligence, and a better, more transparent moral element shall reign, to the glory of God and the joy of the universe.”¹

In this chapter, I use the preaching of Henry Ward Beecher to trace important developments within modernism as a discourse of racial theism in the decades leading up to the rise of eugenic science in the United States. Like Bushnell, Beecher defined national development as a process of perfecting the white racial body. He also attributed alleged moral

¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1886), 217.

and mental differences between races and stocks to the hereditary effects of sin. Yet Beecher embraced evolutionism and, along with it, two key ideas that were important for the further development of modernism as a discourse of racial theism: 1) the notion that humans had hereditarily descended from animals and 2) the idea that the destruction of unfitness had a positive affect on the development of the race. Reading human evolution as an upward process of embodied perfection while equating unfitness with sinfulness, Beecher was able to recast evolution as a “great struggle of extrication,”² one that envisioned God propagating the race out of its animal nature and into the embodied ideal of Christ. In this way, Beecher’s work demonstrates how modernism reconciled evolutionary motifs of fitness, struggle, and survival with white middle-class Christian ideals of meekness, civility, and moral uprightness.

Historians have appraised Beecher’s work and his role as a leading public figure in a number of ways, the majority of which emphasize his liberalizing impact upon American mainline Protestantism. In her 2006 biography, for example, Debby Applegate argues that Beecher played a pivotal role in the disestablishment of Calvinism, with Beecher helping to introduce Americans to a “Gospel of Love” by portraying God “not [as] an exacting judge but as a loving parent.”³ In an older biography, Clifford E. Clark endorses a parallel understanding of Beecher and his work, emphasizing that, through his liberalizing message, Beecher was able to “reinforce central tenets of the Victorian middle-class outlook.”⁴ I regard Beecher in a similar light, but my analysis focuses specifically on the ways in which hereditarian thought and practice

² Ibid., 207.

³ Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 13.

⁴ Clifford E. Clark, Jr., *Henry Ward Beecher: Spokesman for Middle-Class America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 4.

influenced Beecher's attempts to modernize American Protestant Christianity. Additionally, I view Beecher's work as part of a broader propagative turn in white American middle class Christianity in which nineteenth century Protestants began to reconceive religion as a force for normalizing the development of the body politic and thereby establishing national unity. In outlining the important components of Beecher's racial theism, my intention is to uncover how Beecher facilitated affluent white New Englanders' re-understanding of Christianity as a racially propagative force and a power for national advancement.

Hereditary Thought at the End of the Nineteenth Century

In today's genomic world, we take the notion of heredity for granted. We readily assume that we inherit our physical traits and mental dispositions from our ancestors. We thus also presume that life has an agency of its own, one that, for better or worse, is often beyond our power to mediate. The agency that we ascribe to life corresponds with our conception of the latter as a kind of organizing vector or developmental substrate that transcends the being that we possess as individualized lives. Even if we are unable to express this idea in scientific terms, we nonetheless assume the existence of a biological substrate that we generally refer to as "heredity," while also believing that this vector has a power and influence of its own.

The naturalness with which we invoke the notion of heredity, however, blinds us to the fact that heredity is actually a relatively new idea. As Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger argue, "Until the end of the eighteenth century, naturalists and physicians did not talk about biological 'inheritance', a substance transmitted independently from the processes and circumstances of conception and development."⁵ Although the science of heredity has changed significantly over the past two hundred years, with contemporary genetics embracing an idiom of

⁵ Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *A Cultural History of Heredity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

“information transmission,” the notion of heredity has consistently referred to the existence of a germinal substance that makes the continuous development of life possible.⁶ Yet before the late eighteenth century, there was no conceptualization of life as a developmentally autonomous process and thus no concept of heredity.⁷

The hereditary conception of life as a developmental substrate had a powerful effect on nineteenth century American society. As a number of histories of eugenics demonstrate, the concept of heredity supported the development of naturalistic approaches to social reform, which paved the way for the rise of eugenic thought and practice in the United States. After the Civil War, for example, heredity became the dominant mode for explaining the intergenerational persistence of crime. With reform-minded Americans increasingly reading human physical and mental characteristics as a product of heredity, it was during this time that, as Nicole Hahn Rafter argues, the criminal became someone who was “born” as such.⁸ In 1877, for example, a New York prison reformer named Richard Dugdale published his analysis of “the Jukes,” a criminal kin group who Dugdale argued represented a case of “hereditary pauperism.”⁹ Insisting that

⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁷ In the “premodern perspective,” Müller-Wille and Rheinberger explain, “The reason for similarities between offspring and their procreators was not sought in a stable and self-sufficient substance that was passed from generation to generation and that determined the properties of individual beings. It was rather to be found in the fact that the generation and development of individual beings usually occurred under similar circumstances and thus usually involved similar materials and causes.” Ibid., 19. Müller-Wille and Rheinberger’s conclusions support their broader argument that scientific theories of heredity developed during the colonial era as populations became increasingly mobile. Ibid., 3. During more sedentary times, laws of likeness were established by drawing connections between “particular constellations of climatic, economic, political, and social factors.” Ibid., 19.

⁸ Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁹ Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 65-66.

heredity “fixes the organic characteristics of the individual” while the environment “affects modifications in that heredity,” Dugdale set out to investigate how much of “the Jukes” “crime and public dependence” should be attributed to heredity and how much to the environment.¹⁰ As Matt Wray argues, Dugdale’s research was incredibly influential, representing the “beginning of a eugenics reform movement in the United States.”¹¹

The notion of heredity provided the basis for hereditarianism, a modern epistemological framework premised upon a developmental conceptualization of life and the concomitant idea that life can be controlled and augmented through human intervention. The problem with scholarly analyses of hereditarianism, however, is that most assume that the latter came at the expense of religious authority,¹² when, in fact, during the nineteenth century hereditarian ideas actually strengthened Christianity as an important means to progress. It is certainly true that the rising influence of hereditary thought demonstrates the increasing influence of naturalism upon American society during the late nineteenth century. Heredity, for example, provided an emerging class of professional reformers with a naturalistic framework for conceiving social problems.¹³ It also enabled them to re-conceptualize specific approaches to reform in naturalistic terms. Thus, professionals like Dugdale argued that one needed to make interventions within the propagative cycle of human generations, which entailed intervening within the home lives of the poor, criminal, and allegedly degenerate. Yet with most reformers at the time subscribing to a

¹⁰ Richard L. Dugdale, *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910 [4th ed.]), 11-12.

¹¹ Wray, *Not Quite White*, 66.

¹² See, for example, Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

¹³ Nicole Hahn Rafter, ed., *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

Lamarckian understanding of heredity, there was plenty of room for reformers to continue to promote the uplifting influence of Christianity and to view the latter as an important part of reform efforts. Nineteenth century reformers who advocated hereditary approaches to progress also endorsed the transformative power of Christianity as a means of providing an uplifting influence upon future generations.

Nineteenth century reformers' understanding of heredity involved a rudimentary combination of Lamarckism and vitalism. Although they conceptualized life as an organizing substrate that ultimately transcended the individualized bodies that it produced, nineteenth century reformers did not imagine a sharp separation between what one might call the ontogenetic body (or the body of the individual) and the hereditary substances. This was true for liberalizing religious reformers, like Beecher, and professionals who were affiliated with reformatory institutions, like Dugdale. In their Lamarckian understanding, the body interacted with the hereditary materials, with the former influencing the latter over the course of a given lifetime. Thus, healthful improvements made during an individual's life were seen to have salubrious hereditary effects. As Brian C. Wilson argues, one of the widespread assumptions of hereditary thinking in the nineteenth century was the idea that "if a parent either improved or impaired him- or herself through virtuous or immoral practices, the child would consequently experience better or worse character and health."¹⁴ This is different from contemporary genetics, which typically imagines less reciprocity between the vector of heredity and the corrective influence of individual initiative. As I discuss in chapter 5, nineteenth century assumptions regarding heredity also contradicted hereditary doctrines promoted by early twentieth century

¹⁴ Brian C. Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 138.

mainline eugenicists like Charles Davenport, who insisted that the influence of training and environment upon heredity were much more limited.

In addition to Lamarckism, pre-twentieth century understandings of heredity were influenced by nineteenth century vitalism. The latter assumed that life was animated by a “vital force” whose energy and power could be traced but not explained. According to Stephen Nissenbaum, vitalism represented a scientific perspective that sharply distinguished between animate and inanimate substances, with living things being governed by a vital force that was irreducible to the laws of chemistry or physics. As Nissenbaum narrates, for nineteenth century vitalists, “What distinguished animate from inanimate substances was precisely the fact that the laws governing the latter ceased to operate in the former. Living organisms, for instance, resisted such physical principles as the law of gravitation, just as they resisted such chemical principles as the law of decay.”¹⁵ Famous nineteenth century Christian health reformers like Sylvester Graham, William Alcott, and Elizabeth Blackwell were vitalists, promoting the idea that certain foods and habits had an enervating effect on the body’s vital energy. They especially targeted meat consumption, alcohol and tobacco use, and sexual overindulgence as practices that vitiated the vital force. In the vitalist model, health was understood as a diminishment or increase of the vital power. Thus, central to Christian health reform was the notion that the vital force could be increased through bodily regulation and proper diet. The result would be longer life, perhaps eventually equivalent to the long lives enjoyed by Adam, Methusaleh, and Noah.¹⁶

Vitalist ideas infused popular and professional understandings of heredity, both of which tended to see the latter as a force that could be strengthened or weakened by a person’s lifestyle.

¹⁵ Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 57.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg*, 137.

Unlike today where we often talk about heredity in the quantitative terms of “information systems” or “codes,” in the nineteenth century heredity was primarily conceived as a force or energy whose effects were registered in qualitative terms of power or magnitude. For instance, Christian health reformers promoted the idea that propensities to specific diseases were inheritable, a notion that was articulated in the vitalist framework of inherited debility.¹⁷

Institutional reformers also understood heredity as a strengthening or enervating power. In fact, Dugdale’s entire 1877 analysis of “the Jukes” was premised upon vitalist principles. He argued that immoral behavior (and the condition of “pauperism” in general) resulted “from some form of waning vitality, actual or potential.” Diseases compounded the condition of pauperism by further vitiating the “vital force” and with it a person’s capacity for morality (an argument that underscores the equation between moral uprightness and vital power in vitalist thought).¹⁸ Moreover, the loss of a person’s vital force had a direct effect upon heredity, causing the diminishment of life as a developmental power. Thus, Dugdale argued that pauper diseases like syphilis produced “cerebral atrophy” or “idiocy” in subsequent generations. Describing “idiocy” as an “‘arrest of development’, chiefly of the brain and of the nervous system,” Dugdale maintained that these hereditary effects resulted from “insufficient nutrition during ante-natal life.” But the influence of vitalism upon Dugdale’s analysis is best evidenced by his conclusion regarding the hereditary sources of pauperism: “Pauperism here stands as the social equivalent of disease, which is a form of weakness.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 138.

¹⁸ Dugdale, *The Jukes*, 60.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

Vitalism dominated nineteenth century conceptualizations of heredity precisely because its theoretical framework allowed reformers to successfully fuse a Christian moral economy grounded in personal righteousness to a developmental understanding of life. In such a framework, sin became both the cause and product of bodily weakness (the precondition for immorality), while righteousness became the cause and product of bodily strength (the precondition for moral erectness). In this way, vitalism attests to the strong Christian dimensions of nineteenth century health culture, underscoring the inherently Christian aspects of the concept of health itself.

Scholars of American religious history have uncovered many of the important ways in which vitalism shaped the Christian practice of health.²⁰ But scholars have been less assiduous in uncovering the ways in which vitalism shaped the early development of eugenic-like ideas and practices within middle-class Anglo-American Protestant culture. If vitalism established a more or less seamless continuity between health as a physiological concept, on the one hand, and health as a religio-moral precept, on the other, it also allowed one to frame race propagation as a Christian enterprise, since it made personal righteousness fundamental to the development of life. And this is precisely what Beecher's hereditarian ideas demonstrate, namely the intrinsic connections between the emergence of race propagation as a Christian practice and the rise of hereditarianism as a privileged approach to social progress.

²⁰ See, for example, R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); James C. Whorton, *Crusaders for Fitness: The History of American Health Reformers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008 [1976]).

Beecher & Race Propagation

In a sermon that he delivered in 1883 at Plymouth Church and that he published in *Evolution and Religion*, Beecher heralded a coming age in which there was to be “such knowledge of heredity as shall lead men to wiser selections,” an age in which the society that “has learned how to breed sheep for better wool, horses for better speed, and ox for better beef” will have it “dawn on their minds that it is worthwhile to breed better men too.” In such an age, Beecher surmised, “Generation will [...] supersede Regeneration.”²¹ Conceiving heredity as a kind of vital substrate that could be cultivated for advancing national progress, Beecher proclaimed, “We shall purge out vast amounts of the stock from which comes sin and children will begin higher, and be quicker to appreciate what is the genius of the gospel of Christ, and to carry it out in all the ways of life.”²² In a sermon that he delivered two years later and that he also published in *Evolution and Religion*, Beecher boldly asserted his theological commitment to better breeding: “I believe in the theology that stands directly connected with the discipline, the development, and the perfection of the human race.”²³

In insisting that heredity could be used for Christian ends, Beecher realized that he was promoting a novel approach to advancing Christendom, or, at least, an approach that only a few ministers had begun to advocate. Nonetheless, Beecher maintained that better breeding represented the path to true progress, for it would ensure the propagation of righteous bodies. “The human body must be born better,” Beecher averred, “the human mind and dispositions must come into life through better families; families must stand under better institutions and

²¹ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 215.

²² Ibid., 216.

²³ Ibid., 107.

better governments –under divine laws and institutions; and we can only come to the higher through the imitation of these.” Beecher admitted that this was “a slow work,” one that must patiently follow the gradual advance of human knowledge. For this reason, Beecher insisted, “There are very few pulpits that [presently] teach it, or that are competent to teach it; but it must come. It is a great work, it is a glorious work, the fulfillment of which will be the new heaven and the new earth.”²⁴

In arguing that the future of Christianity opened upon knowledge of human heredity, Beecher followed a precedent set by Horace Bushnell, who believed that the primary mode of Christian expansion should be the propagative development of the race. Both ministers preached a gospel of hereditarianism, as they each used heredity to reconceive God’s redemptive plan in terms of race propagation. In proposing a propagative plan for Christianity, both men viewed life as a progressive, healthful force that simply needed to be guided by righteous living, an outlook made possible by combining Christianity’s redemptive message with vitalistic precepts. But there is a major difference between the two ministers’ thinking, namely Beecher’s acceptance of “evolutionism,” which for him revolved around the idea that “higher” forms of life evolved from “lower” ones.

Beecher was an early convert to Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary theory. In fact, Newell Dwight Hillis, who indirectly succeeded Beecher at the helm of Plymouth Church, praised his predecessor as “foremost among clergymen in utilizing Spencer’s expositions of the development theory.”²⁵ Hillis’ characterization is supported by the fact that Beecher gave a speech at an 1882 dinner for Spencer in which he bluntly asserted, “I think that the doctrine of

²⁴ Ibid., 216.

²⁵ Newell Dwight Hillis, ed., *Lectures and Orations by Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1913), 312.

Evolution and its relation to the work of Mr. Spencer [...] is going to revolutionize theology from one end to the other.”²⁶ In his speech, Beecher accepted the central hypothesis of evolutionism –i.e., that humans descended from animals. Beecher dismissed the controversy surrounding this hypothesis by suggesting that evolutionary processes had brought humanity across an ontological threshold that sharply distinguished it from the rest of the animal kingdom. Addressing the notion that humans evolved from the “immortal monkey,” Beecher declared, “A great many people are loath to think that such an origin should be hinted at by science, that it should stand even as a hypothesis. I would just as lief have descended from a monkey as from anything else if I had descended far enough.”²⁷

In general, human animality did not shake Beecher’s faith in life as a progressive power nor did it undermine his belief that Christianity offered a vision of redemption that supported natural laws of human development. This is because, in adapting Spencer’s ideas to his own, Beecher did not imagine evolution as a random, arbitrary process, but rather, as an ongoing act of creation or becoming whereby God incarnated his will through the propagation of a perfect race. As Richard Hofstadter observes in his classic work, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Spencer supplied a couple of key ideas that were crucial for Beecher and other theological liberals during the late nineteenth century. First there was Spencer’s doctrine of the “survival of the fittest” and the general idea that death and destruction had a positive effect on evolutionary development. I explore this idea in Beecher’s preaching in the next section of the chapter. Second, there was Spencer’s notion that human evolution was moral in scope and purpose, with the development of psychological powers (including the intellectual and moral

²⁶ Ibid., 315.

²⁷ Ibid., 318.

faculties) constituting the warp and woof of the evolutionary process. Subscribing to Lamarckism, Spencer believed that “[...] if mental as well as physical characteristics could be inherited, the intellectual powers of the race would become cumulatively greater, and over several generations the ideal man would finally be developed.”²⁸ Beecher adapted this idea in his preaching, promoting a version of evolution in which God, through the incarnation of his son, Jesus Christ, revealed his plan for the human race, a plan that unfolded through the evolutionary perfection of humanity’s moral, intellectual, and spiritual powers.

In accepting the idea that the human race had descended from animals, Beecher reconceived the human as an ontologically liminal organism consisting of two halves or natures. First, there was the “base under man,” which he associated with the “crude, primitive world of matter.”²⁹ Beecher identified this half of the human with the primal or instinctual functioning of the body as expressed through appetites and desires. Second, humans (and especially the adult members of supposedly superior races), consisted of an upper half, which Beecher called the “spiritual upper-man” and which he identified with the transcendent powers of the mind. Beecher envisioned an eternal struggle between these two halves, the “base under-man” and the “spiritual upper-man.” As Beecher put it, “In the development along the middle line where the animal meets the spiritual man, there is an eternal storm, a cloud that never blows away, and thunder that never dies out of the horizon of time.”³⁰

In Beecher’s developmental conception, the human was stretched between a higher and lower nature, one nature aspiring toward the holy and divine and the other rooted in the primal

²⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 39.

²⁹ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

world of instinct and passion. The point of evolution was to enlarge the upper nature so that it held dominion over the lower. Thus, Beecher conceived evolution as a process of “unfolding,” whereby individuals and races passed through five ascending stages, with the unfolding of each stage depending upon the completeness of the previous one. The first stage was the animal, after which came the social, moral, intellectual, and spiritual. “At each stage of development,” Beecher argued, “the mind becomes sensitive to higher impulses and truths, and finally it is capable of receiving the direct influence of the divine presence.” The purpose of Christianity was to teach those godly ideals that hastened this unfolding process, with Beecher interpreting the importance of Christ in the following way:

Christ called men from gross animal life to the moral life; there can be no doubt about that [...] That was, however, but a beginning, a foundation on which a noble, invisible, spiritual structure was to be built. He taught that there was a stage yet beyond common morality; that it was possible to unfold man’s nature to a higher and nobler condition; and that man by nature was like a seed either not planted or not half-grown, and that there was, beyond mere civic morality –rectitude in ourselves and to our fellows –even beyond that there was a mighty sphere, into which every man should go; an ideal character, an unworldly condition, a heroic devotion to the right; and that such development was the direct result of divine influence.³¹

Although Christ provided the ideal for the higher development of individuals, Beecher insisted that Christ’s ultimate objective was to unfold a higher, godlier race. As Beecher remarked in another sermon on evolution at Plymouth Church, “[...] that which I look for is the change of the human race. I am not thinking of *men*, but of *mankind*.”³²

Just as organic life defied the laws of inorganic life in the vitalist conception of things, Beecher imagined that humanity’s spiritual nature defied the primal economy of the material body. In his view, the two natures of man were developmentally continuous, with the “spiritual

³¹ Ibid., 95.

³² Ibid., 128.

upper-man” developing out of the material body, or, at least, with the development of the higher faculties depending upon the vitality of the material body. And yet, while the two natures were bound together, the spiritual faculties rose above the material body in a relationship of subordination that allowed the former to guide the impulses of the latter. The spiritual faculties were thus in a relationship of immanence *and* transcendence with the body, at once depending upon the latter for their proper development while exercising an independent power that allowed them to intervene within the body’s instinctual economy. This paradoxical relationship was key for Beecher’s concept of unfolding, for it was only by controlling the body’s urges (e.g., via inhibition) that the spiritual faculties could strengthen the vital power upon which both they and the body depended. This vitalist understanding of life allowed Beecher to draw a direct connection between individual righteousness and racial development, for the unfolding of the spiritual faculties in one generation increased the inborn potential of the next.

Beecher believed that the spiritual faculties could be awakened in a number of ways, including by more traditional methods. No person, regardless of hereditary endowment, was completely bereft of a higher nature that could be aroused and developed by religious suasion. Thus, for example, Beecher thought that revivals were useful in waking those who, through disposition and the course of habit, had succumbed to their baser instincts. Adhering to a nineteenth century understanding of heredity, Beecher believed that the limits imposed by heredity could always be mitigated by religious influence, if not easily undone. Nonetheless, Beecher believed that the path to true progress meant working with heredity and not against it. As he bluntly averred, “A man who is born with robust health has a better chance than the man who is born an invalid for his father’s sins.” Indeed, heredity was crucial. By improving heredity,

people would be “well born,” already “half converted,” with Beecher going so far as to insist that the race must be first “regenerated by physical birth” before the “great ripeness” can come.³³

Beecher celebrated the redemptive power of the home as an institution for rearing Christians from birth, championing religious nurture and instruction as means to improving the inborn qualities of the race. Of course, this did not mean that Beecher rejected older approaches to salvation modeled on sanctification. As William R. Hutchison argues, the idea that Christians could be grown did not mean that nineteenth century liberals denied the power of God in initiating a conversionary experience or in transforming individuals’ lives.³⁴ Nevertheless, Beecher emphasized the capacity of Christianity to act as an organic power, believing that salvation was most permanent and lasting when its effects were registered within the life processes. Hence, Beecher described a truly transformative Christianity as follows: “It begins as a seed. It develops as a growth. It is relative to the individual characteristics, to the age, the institutions, the whole economy of life.”³⁵ Hence, too, Beecher advocated Christian nurture as the best method for salvation, as it allowed Christianity to be propagated into the development of the child and the race. In a sermon at Plymouth Church, he asserted that “the child brought up in the nature and admonition of the Lord may be trained into its spiritual birth gradually and easily.” Such a fact allowed Beecher to reason that the “whole unfolding process” whereby a child is trained to “right thoughts of God and Christ” is best undertaken in the “sanctuary of the household.” Beecher concluded by insisting that the home was the most important institution for

³³ Ibid., 215.

³⁴ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse*, 80.

³⁵ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 15.

the redemption of the race: “I believe that household instruction will yet supersede all forms of moral influence.”³⁶

Beecher’s scheme of race propagation involved a new understanding of sin, one that departed from Calvinism. Beecher defined sin as follows: [S]in is the persistence of animal passions against the control of the moral sentiments.”³⁷ Elsewhere, Beecher elaborated, “Sin lies in the conflict between animal nature and the dawning of spiritual, moral, and intellectual nature. It is the conflict in man between his upper and lower nature.”³⁸ Such a conceptualization allowed Beecher to frame the consequences of sin in a vitalist framework, with a person’s iniquity weakening the physical constitution, precipitating more sinfulness, and inhibiting the development of the higher faculties. Distinguishing himself from the “old scholastic theology,” Beecher took pains to insist that, in arguing as much, he was not suggesting that sin issued from an inherently “corrupt nature.” Rather, sin resulted from a nature that was neither “unfolded nor harmoniously developed.”³⁹ Through his notion of unfolding, Beecher thus attempted to show that he held a more optimistic view of sin than the Calvinist tradition, which asserted the “absolute corruption of the material body of man.”⁴⁰ In his perspective, human sinfulness could be gradually diminished through the generations, although never completely eliminated.⁴¹ Of course, if Beecher argued that sin did not issue from an inherently corrupt nature as the old

³⁶ Ibid., 99.

³⁷ Ibid., 84.

³⁸ Hillis, *Lectures and Orations*, 321.

³⁹ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 86.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

theology believed, he nonetheless maintained that sin had a vitiating influence upon heredity and the unfolding of the higher faculties within the life of the race.

Like Bushnell, Beecher used a hereditary concept of sin to explain the developmental differences that supposedly existed between the races. In his view, sin blocked hereditary development, which allegedly explained why some races stagnated in primitiveness. The development of “idolatrous” races, Beecher argued, had stalled because they practiced religions that were rooted in animal nature. He articulated this idea to his congregants in the following way: “Antiquity, and contemporaneous pagan nations yet living, have constructed their gods and their character of God by transferring that which they know in themselves to their deities; but they have constructed their deities from their animal passions.” (Among such passions, Beecher listed “pride,” “envy,” “selfishness,” “cruelty,” or, simply put, “the grosser appetites.”)⁴² Pagan religions, in other words, were rooted in primal urges and thus promoted sinfulness; in turn, sinfulness stunted the development of the higher faculties among “barbarians” and “savages.” In this way, Beecher described a developmentally isomorphic relationship between sinfulness, religious practice, and evolutionary stasis: living “by their senses, controlled by objects to be seen or heard or felt from without,” savage races practiced religions that effectively bound them to their “animal lives.”⁴³ Although Beecher never discussed missions to savage nations in his preaching on evolution, his manner of thinking suggests that, for him, the only way to unblock the arrested development of savages would be to promote a spiritual conception of God among them, which would entail evolving their mental powers. As Beecher reasoned, “There must be

⁴² Ibid., 30-31.

⁴³ Ibid., 223.

some similarity to God developed in the human consciousness before the mind can understand the inspired enunciations respecting God's character and designs."⁴⁴

Beecher's hereditary understanding of sin also helped him to explain why certain classes of whites were superior to others. Beecher believed that unequal unfolding explained socio-economic divisions and hierarchies within races. He formulated this idea through the following generalization: "Civilized society always has a specimen within it of every stage which mankind has gone through [...] Society goes, as does the individual germ, through every stage, and shows us each through which in the process of history it has hitherto had to pass." At the bottom of civilized society were those who were given to animal impulses, an idle class consisting of the criminal and chronically poor. This was a stock of whites who "only give forth the energy of their passions –not intellectual energy, not moral, not aesthetic. They give forth simply the energy of selfishness, of pride, of vanity, of ambition, of avarice, combativeness, or destructiveness." In evolutionary terms, this stock of people existed at the "lower tier of the human, and the upper tier of the animal." After this stock, came the "constructors and workers" who were of meager intelligence but who possessed moral integrity and industriousness. This class represented the "vast mass of the respectable people" in civilized society. Next, Beecher described a class who are given to reflection, "men who live in the higher range of their faculties." At the top, Beecher placed a class of teachers and poets, "who have given to knowledge a higher character and a winged form."⁴⁵ Beecher clearly conceived this social hierarchy through his hereditary understanding of sin, as each class was ranked according to its development of moral, intellectual, and spiritual powers. Indeed, there was something almost

⁴⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 223-24.

ethereal about Beecher's superior classes, who, in his description, seemed to live wholly within the bodiless world of thought.

Beecher's preaching on evolution underscores how, during the late nineteenth century, modernist Protestantism continued to develop as a form of Christianity articulated explicitly in the hereditarian terms of race propagation. Like Bushnell, Beecher saw heredity as a template for rethinking the scope and parameters of human redemption. In accepting the evolutionary notion of descent, Beecher departed from his distinguished predecessor; yet he followed Bushnell in one critical respect: he believed that heredity made it possible for Christianity to express its redeeming power within and through life. In Beecher's understanding, heredity opened a progressive dynamic between individual righteousness and the evolutionary development of the race, while at the same time preserving the redemptive message of Christianity.

The Destruction of Unfitness and the Human Animal

For Beecher, evolution presented Christianity with two fundamental problems. The first was the idea that life evolved through the destruction of unfitness, which contradicted Christian principles of charity and compassion. The second was the evolutionary concept of descent, which, in Beecher's middle-class Victorian perspective, revolved around the controversial idea that humans had evolved from ignoble animal origins. Beecher's preaching on evolution demonstrates how modernism would come to address these issues over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beecher reconciled the first issue through the personality of God. Reflecting the influence of white, middle-class domestic culture, Beecher modeled theology on the relationship between parent and child, re-imagining God as a nurturing parent who desired a perfect race. He envisioned the parental love of God in evolutionary terms,

viewing him as a stern but committed father who instructively used the destruction of life to guide his child, the human race, to perfection.

Beecher addressed the second issue by consciously describing evolution as an *ascending* process whereby God was revealing his will through the propagation of a perfect humanity. Beecher described evolution as a gradual process of extrication, whereby the human (defined in terms of the higher faculties) would be gradually drawn out of and set over against the animal. The paradoxical result was that in becoming animal, *the human also became more divine* –or at least potentially so from a propagative perspective. The motifs of “ascent” and “extrication” would come to define modernists’ interpretation of evolution, while, both popularly and professionally, eugenics would be understood as a science that promised to evolve the race beyond its baser impulses and into a more divine-like comportment.

Evolutionism challenged Beecher to address the idea that humans were simply evolved animals. Such a notion undermined the uniqueness of humanity as a special creation, one fashioned in the likeness of God and therefore distinct from the rest of the created order. But racial theism provided a way for liberals like Beecher to adjust to evolutionism, for it enabled them to frame evolution as an ongoing act of creation whereby God was realizing his will on earth through the propagation of a chosen, morally elect race. In Beecher’s imagination, the white race rose above the economy of primal forces that governed the animal kingdom through its special faculties of morality and intelligence, faculties that demonstrated the ontological uniqueness of humans in general but that also underscored the spiritual election of elite whites. Indeed, Beecher described evolution as an intrinsically ascending, albeit laborious process whereby the race was gradually extricating itself from its animal inclinations and becoming inherently disposed to love, mercy, and kindness. As Beecher optimistically declared,

The tendency of this great struggle of extrication is one direction. Not, however, that there are not rebounds, backsets; not that the tendency has not often been met and blighted. There is no fact more extraordinary that the human mind can contemplate than the prodigal waste of creation, the ends being attained finally after a bewildering expenditure of forces; but the tendency is away from violence and cruelty, and it is toward sympathy and love.⁴⁶

In reading evolution theistically –i.e., as a “tendency” away from animality and toward the divine attributes of love and kindness –Beecher’s preaching signals the most important consequence that racial theism had upon hereditarianism in the United States, including organized eugenic initiatives in the early twentieth century. As Beecher’s preaching attests, racial theism cosmologically depicted and morally encoded the evolutionary idea of struggle not as a tooth and nail contest between competing organisms or between an organism and its environment. Rather, racial theism cosmologically and morally affirmed evolutionary struggle as a fight against the animal *within* the race (or against those primal urges that circumscribed the unfolding of the higher faculties). In the United States, hereditarian thought and practice from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth would continue to justify itself through this theistic framework.

For Beecher, the problem of the human animal posed less significant of a problem for Christian theology than the important role that evolution assigned to the destruction of unfitness. As Beecher queried, what difference did it make if humans had descended from animals so long as they descended far enough? Yet the destruction of unfitness posed a more substantive problem in Beecher’s mind. Like Spencer, who coined the phrase, “survival of the fittest,” Beecher had to convince his congregation and his readership that destruction of unfitness accorded with God’s creative work.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 207.

“Death,” Beecher insisted, “seems to be the instrument by which life itself is supplied with improvement and advancement. Death prepares the way for life.” Beecher argued that the destruction of unfitness was part of the process of unfolding and thus a part of God’s propagative plan for the race. Death, he opined, carried “creation up to higher planes and upon higher lines, reaching more complicated conditions in structure, in function, in adaptation, with systematic and harmonious results, so that the whole physical creation is organizing itself for a sublime march toward perfectness.”⁴⁷ In short, death –or the hereditary destruction of unfitness –had creative potential; it possessed a purifying, perfecting, and even consecrating power when it came to the form, expression, and purpose of life.

In Beecher’s understanding, fitness was not primarily a measure of an organism’s strength and virility. Rather, fitness was a function of the moral, intellectual, and spiritual faculties and their relative development at both the individual and racial levels. Put differently, fitness was a measure of a person or race’s capacity to avoid sinfulness, which meant that fitness referred to an innate capacity to subordinate the animal half of the human. Thus, sinfulness and unfitness were more or less the same thing, with sinfulness thereby directly correlating with evolutionary development. Evolutionary death was productive in so far as it weeded out the sources of human sinfulness and hastened creation’s march toward perfectness.

The destruction of unfitness, Beecher insisted, was a part of God’s evolutionary plan, an act of love by a devoted father toward his child. The love that Beecher had in mind when he described the destruction of unfitness was always a propagative love expressed by a divinity who kept a constant eye on the development of his child, the human race. This is why Beecher contrasted God’s love, which was a “conception of *infinite* love” with human love, which was

⁴⁷ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 115.

always a “conception of *finite* love.”⁴⁸ The difference between the two, he argued, made it difficult for ordinary people to understand how the destruction of unfitness could be justified through the rubric of love and compassion. Only when people considered God’s love beyond the finite understanding of their own would they be able to comprehend evolutionary death from the viewpoint of love and devotion.

Beecher explained that understanding the destruction of unfitness as part of God’s love was nearly impossible from the perspective of the individual. “If we look at the phenomena of suffering from the earthly point of view, and with the limitation of our faculties, and from our limited knowledge of moral uses and ways, darkness and doubt are not only extremely natural, but inevitable.”⁴⁹ The trick, for Beecher, was to try to see how evolutionary death bespoke God’s constant devotion to his creation. From the individual’s perspective, Beecher admitted, evolutionary death seemed like a massive amount of waste and an inordinate amount of senseless suffering, but from the perspective of “infinite love” such waste and suffering signaled the divine’s perpetual devotion to his creation. Comparing God to a carpenter, Beecher articulated this idea to his congregants in the following way,

As the carpenter has numberless shavings, and a vast amount of wastage of every log which he would shape to some use, so creation has been an enormous waste, such as seems like a squandering, on the scale of human life, but not to Him that dwells in Eternity. In bringing the world to its present conditions, vast amounts of things have lived for a time and were unable to hold on, and let go and perished.⁵⁰

In another sermon, Beecher compared God to a gardener, while suggesting that humans, who were simply individual plants within the “garden of the Lord,” could not see to what ends their

⁴⁸ Ibid., 170. Emphases added.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 115.

cultivation was working.⁵¹ In Beecher's mind, the suffering and apparent senselessness that came with evolutionary death blinded people from seeing the infinite love that God demonstrated in his assiduousness to his ultimate objective, the production of a human race that increasingly shared his love of goodness and truth.

Beecher attempted to illustrate the instructive value of evolutionary death by likening pain and suffering to purifying forces. Pain and suffering are, Beecher declared, "God's ministers, God's school masters, God's police. Their function in the scheme of life is vital. Pressure and attrition are indispensable in the evolving of the race according to the terms and conditions of their creation."⁵² In other words, pain and suffering taught individuals the path to righteousness, which ensured that they bequeathed a healthy heritage to their descendants. Drawing from a vitalist conception of sin, Beecher equated pain and suffering with bodily excess, as these weakened the body's constitution and made it susceptible to disease and decay. Pain and suffering thereby helped to affirm righteousness, encouraging individuals to choose purity and life. "From childhood and its earliest days," Beecher averred, "men need to be drawn and to be thrust upward. Pain and sorrow are the thrustings, the pushes, as it were [...] Pain, from behind, pushes [men] up."⁵³ Just as the individual learns righteousness through pain and suffering, Beecher reasoned, so God "converts pain and sorrow to helpful uses"⁵⁴ in order to push his creation toward a "final" and "transcendent" objective.⁵⁵ Through such logic, Beecher

⁵¹ Ibid., 167.

⁵² Ibid., 233.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 168.

attempted to show his congregants how God's infinite understanding of love overlapped with their own finite comprehension: just as pain and suffering purified the individual person, so these ministers of life also cleansed and advanced the race.

Beecher attempted to harmonize his concept of divine love with his theistic understanding of evolutionary struggle. The law of love, he argued, was a new law, one that would ultimately supersede the grand law of nature. Beecher described the law of nature in Spencerian terms. In nature, the strong prevail, while the weak "go to the wall," an arrangement that ensured that the strongest in body survive to perpetuate their kind. Yet Beecher believed that, through its development into more complex forms, life was producing a new law, a law of love, nurture, and protection that he traced to the emergence of the parental instincts. This new law began as an imperfect tendency, "far back in the twilight, on the boundary that separates men from animals,"⁵⁶ gradually evolving into the loving administrations of the white middle-class family.

Importantly, however, the realization of this law within the life of the race was far from complete. The Bible, which Beecher described as "the most eminent record" of an "unfolding tendency" toward protection and nurture, heralded the day when the race would exhibit this higher law more naturally and immediately than any other disposition. Yet presently the race remained caught in a "mixture between these two tendencies," which for Beecher denoted both the incompleteness of evolution and its promise. Revelation was an ongoing act, coterminous with the evolutionary process whereby the human unfolded from the animal. Thus, Beecher rejected the idea that the Bible is "the only revelation that [God] has ever made." While the Bible "surely contains a revelation," Beecher admitted, it is "not a completed revelation." "God is not

⁵⁶ Ibid., 194.

done revealing,” he averred. “The spiritual moral consciousness of Christendom does not annul the early teachings of the Sacred Scriptures, but unfolds and fulfills them.”⁵⁷

For Beecher, heredity transcribed revelation into the developmental idiom of life, opening a relatively fluid and reciprocating relationship between human righteousness, life, and the unfolding of providence. Gradually, Beecher maintained, the law of love would supplant the law of cruelty and force. In such an age, the higher faculties would be more perfectly unfolded within the race and the effects of sinfulness would gradually disappear as righteousness became more and more inborn. Pain and suffering would be increasingly unnecessary to guide the race along its upward course as the higher faculties came to regulate the body according to the dictates of providence. The result would be the slow but sure obviation of the grand law of nature with respect to human evolution and the gradual transfiguration of the human-animal into a more divine-like being.

Beecher’s Racial Theism

Americans tend to associate eugenics with science. This view is supported by histories of eugenics, both scholarly and popular. In Daniel Kevles’ authoritative 1985 analysis, for example, the story of American eugenics begins with Francis Galton and continues with twentieth century Anglo-American scientists like Charles Davenport, who sought to place Galton’s reformist vision on the firm footing of classical genetics.⁵⁸ Edwin Black’s popular 2003 work also narrates eugenics through the history of science, focusing on the professional collaboration between American eugenicists and Nazi racial hygienists during the 1920s and 30s.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid. 39.

⁵⁸ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Narrating eugenics through the history of science, however, obscures the fact that eugenic-like ideas and practices emerged in the United States well before the rise of mainline eugenics in the early twentieth century. Just before and after the Civil War, hereditarian ideas allowed liberal Protestants to reconceive redemption through the framework of race perfectionism, which principally involved re-conceptualizing the relationship between providence and religious practice in the theistic framework of race propagation.

Hereditarianism supported the liberalizing work of Protestants like Bushnell and Beecher, who looked to update Christianity for Victorian era society and to redefine the scope and aims of redemption through the reproductive function of the home. Their theological work complemented the labors of innovating nineteenth century feminists like Catherine Beecher who defined the home (and the work of women within it) in terms of national development.⁶⁰ Race propagation transformed reproduction into a biopolitical act by teleologically linking reproduction, national progress, and the unfolding of providence. Modernizers who promoted a propagative understanding of Christianity, like Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher,

⁵⁹ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Quest to Build a Master Race* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).

⁶⁰ For Catherine Beecher's own reflections on the connection between domestic piety and national development, see the first chapter of *Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and School* (Boston: Thomas H. Webb, 1843). Catherine Beecher also reflected on the broader implications of domestic piety for the development of the human race. Like her brother, and perhaps to an even greater extent, she redefined Christian salvation in propagative terms. Reflecting on Christian redemption as gradual process of overcoming animalistic instincts, she once wrote, "[T]he history of the race, from infancy through its stages of barbarism, heathenism, civilization, and Christianity, is a process of *suffering*, as the lower principles of humanity are gradually subjected to the higher, while men learn to give up lower gratifications for the more elevated, and to sacrifice the lesser good of the minority to the well-being of the majority." Catherine Beecher, *Common Sense Applied to Religion; or, the Bible and the People* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857), 37. For a scholarly account of Catherine Beecher's impact on the formation of domestic piety, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976).

supported the establishment of Christian creeds and practices that could harness the developmental potential of the American population, with these two leaders drawing upon theistic models of human development to rank and assess classes and races in terms of their respective reproductive promise. It was with the development of race propagation and the racial theism that supported it that eugenic-like ideas of controlled and purposeful population growth first appeared in the United States.

Developing over the course of nineteenth century, race propagation was premised upon the idea that one could *grow* or *rear* Christians from birth. Race propagation developed as part of Protestant liberalism, which sought to loosen Calvinism's hold on mainstream American religious practice in order to make Christianity an active, progressive part of social production and societal development. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a number of institutions arose to address the needs of the young nation, including the modern home, public school, and other institutions that could establish national unity by normalizing the development of the body politic. What made these institutions possible was a naturalistic or developmental understanding of life. The nucleated home and the public school, for example, were made possible by the modern notion of "childhood," which confounded Calvinistic concepts of predestination and election by understanding human moral nature in developmental terms.⁶¹ As human nature came to be seen as an organic product of bodily development, reproduction, childrearing, and education became paramount political concerns, with the modern home and the school emerging to address the political exigency of normalized national growth. Modernizing Protestants like Bushnell and Beecher (along with other prominent members of the Beecher clan), came to view

⁶¹ See, for example, Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School*, 1988; Robert W. Lynn and Elliott Wright, *The Big Little School: Sunday Child of American Protestantism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

Calvinism as a hindrance to the development of these institutions and thus to national progress. They often openly attacked Calvinism as an outdated and regressive religion, defining and championing a new, propagative version of Christianity that reconceived its message and scope in the developmental language of racial theism.

Contemporary European scholars have used Michel Foucault's theory of biopower to rethink the history of eugenics in the various national contexts in which it developed. These scholars have led a conscious shift away from understanding eugenics through the history of science and toward a historiography that broadly frames eugenics as a pro-natal approach to modernization and nation building.⁶² From the perspective of biopower, eugenics was not simply a science but a modern way of defining the relationship between citizen-subjects and the nation, one that viewed reproduction as a national resource and a means to national progress. Thus, Marius Turda characterizes eugenics as the "paradigmatic expression" of a process that he calls the "biologisation of national belonging." In characterizing eugenics as such, Turda identifies eugenics as an intrinsic part of a modernizing process whereby, through the lens of population management, the nation is "progressively portrayed as a biological entity whose natality, longevity, morbidity, and mortality need to be supervised."⁶³

For Turda, eugenic thought and practice emerged not with science per se, but rather, with a modern way of defining the relationship between power, reproductivity, and national development. But Turda, following Foucault, still imagines biologisation as a secularizing process whereby the livelihood of populations came under the care and protection of scientific authorities. In the American context, the biologisation of the country happened not in spite of

⁶² See especially, Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶³ Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

religious authority, but *because of it*, that is, because modernizing reformers like Bushnell and Beecher began to reconceive religion as the most important developmental force in rearing a righteous body politic. The theistic idea that God was actively creating his kingdom on earth through the propagation of a perfect race was fundamental to this modernizing process. The discourse of racial theism developed over the course of nineteenth century as liberal leaders like Bushnell and Beecher sought to reconceive Christianity from a racially propagative point of view. Racial theism supported race propagation by providing a theological framework for justifying biopolitical discrimination, that is, for defending and promoting one group's reproductivity over and against others'.

As discussed in chapter one, Bushnell identified an incipient divinity within the Saxon stock, which for him testified to the hereditary election of New England, its natural propagative power, and its providential purpose with respect to national expansion. Bushnell propounded a kind of racial immanentism, believing that the divine-like attribute of sovereignty within the Saxon stock could be enhanced through the propagative devotion of domestic piety. Although Bushnell did not argue that God was literally inside the Saxon germ, maintaining at least a theoretical distinction between the natural and supernatural, he nonetheless understood the propagative development and territorial expansion of said germ as a part of God's redemptive plan for humanity. In this way, Bushnell's writing serves as an example of Turda's concept of biologisation, for it marks one of the first clear-cut cases in which an American leader promoted national growth explicitly through a hereditarian understanding of reproduction.

Bushnell's work also reflects Turda's notion of biologization in its assessment of non-white populations' reproductive influence upon national progress. Thus, for example, Bushnell evaluated the question of slavery by considering the propagative power of the "African race."

Importantly, Bushnell opposed slavery on the grounds that it denied African men and women the human right to the “family state,” a point that underscores the intimacy between the nationalization of reproduction during the nineteenth century and the construction of slavery as a moral controversy. Although he opposed slavery, however, Bushnell believed that emancipation would ultimately result in the African race’s extinction on the continent (and perhaps eventually the globe). Bushnell maintained that it was impossible to propagate “an uncultivated and barbarous stock” incapable of sovereignty into a “cultivated and civilized” one. The hereditary taints within the African race were allegedly too deep to be propagated out. “It would not be strange,” he concluded, “if vices, which taint the blood and cut down life, should, within fifty years, penetrate the whole stock, and begin to hurry them off, in a process of premature extinction.”⁶⁴ The point is not simply that Bushnell saw Africans as an inferior race, but that he viewed the consequences of their emancipation and socio-political enfranchisement almost exclusively in terms of their reproductive power, with Africans ultimately being eliminated as a reproductive unit or sub-population given their supposedly limited potential as such. Bushnell’s ideas regarding emancipation reflect Turda’s concept of biologisation because they underscore a normative correlation between biological identity, propagative potential, and national growth.

Bushnell’s concept of sovereignty provided a theistic framework for understanding the allegedly disparate developmental potentials between the races. Sovereignty was not simply modern racism dressed in religious garb; its theistic import was central to popular constructions of race within Protestant America. Bushnell’s theistic construction of race, therefore, was not simply an iteration of modern racism, but an inflection of a new kind of power. By Saxon sovereignty, Bushnell did not simply mean political sovereignty; he meant *reproductive* or *bio-*

⁶⁴ Horace Bushnell, *A Discourse on the Slavery Question* (Hartford: Case, Tiffany, and Co., 1839), 11-12.

political sovereignty, which in this case refers to an assessment of power made explicitly in propagative terms. Bushnell's theism thus supported a propagative sense of election in which slaves were disqualified from the national body because of their limited propagative potential. My point is that racial theism emerged as a discursive practice for defining the relationship between race, power, and providence in reproductive terms, with the notion of providence (here conceived as an inborn power) dividing between those who were qualified and disqualified with respect to their reproductivity. And this is how racial theism supported the rise of eugenic thought and practice, as a principle of inclusion/exclusion with respect to a biologised national community imagined explicitly in terms of its reproductive potential.

Henry Ward Beecher's preaching on evolution demonstrates that the discourse of racial theism continued to develop as a biopolitical mode of discrimination that allowed one to distinguish between which races or stocks' were qualified for reproduction and which ones were not. Beecher did not use the term sovereignty, but his notion of unfolding worked in a way that paralleled Bushnell's theism. Unfolding denoted a similar relationship of height whereby higher faculties subordinated the lower ones. It referred to a propagative process whereby spiritual faculties emerged over and above the baser impulses, setting the latter to higher purposes. Unfolding thus marked a category or spectrum of propagative fitness expressed in theistic terms.

It is true that, like Bushnell, Beecher insisted that God and life were separate. Yet following Bushnell, Beecher also saw God realizing his purposes within and through life. As Beecher put it, "God is not matter; God is not in matter [...] Yet all laws, all susceptibilities, issue from him. They are the result of his intelligence and of his will. Their power is the continuous power of God as the life of the world."⁶⁵ Such a formulation allowed Beecher to read

⁶⁵ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 64.

race propagation in theistic terms, since the “universality and power of God’s presence are the cause of all activity, both in the material globe and in the intellectual and moral development of human kind.”⁶⁶ Theistically, Beecher’s notion of unfolding denoted a kind of inborn register of providence; it bespoke the immanence of God’s terrestrial kingdom on earth, thereby serving as a biopolitical mode of discerning between qualified and unqualified life. Hence, Beecher insisted that the kingdom of God did not refer to a specific place in time and space but the process whereby the “moral condition” was unfolding in the human race. “[A]nybody who reaches up to that moral condition is a member of that kingdom,” Beecher concluded, with the kingdom of God here referring simultaneously to an inwardly unfolding providential realm and an outwardly advancing political order. “All those who have their inward and nobler nature developed until they feel in themselves the inspiration of God’s presence and love are inhabitants of that kingdom; and none others are.”⁶⁷

Beecher’s notion of unfolding allowed him to distinguish between those who should and should not reproduce. Like Bushnell, he saw blacks as inherently inferior and thus deficient with respect to the higher faculties. Unlike Bushnell, however, who used his concept of sovereignty to support his belief in the hereditary superiority of Saxon stock, Beecher did not privilege New England whites in his theistic scheme to the same, nearly exclusive extent as Bushnell. Beecher, who delivered his sermons on evolutionism after the Civil War, seemed to imagine race propagation as an activity that allied working, middle-class, and upper-class whites from both Northern *and* Southern stocks. Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that Beecher never explicitly prioritized New England whites in his preaching on race perfectionism, even though he

⁶⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

clearly conceived them as a more or less distinct hereditary stock. Such an interpretation is also buttressed by Beecher's public role after the Civil War as a leading voice in the promotion of national reconciliation.⁶⁸ Indeed, it may be that Beecher envisioned race perfectionism as a religious undertaking that could reunite Northern and Southern whites under common providence, although it is unlikely that Southerners would have been receptive to his embrace of evolutionism. In any case, Beecher, like Bushnell, saw the propagation of the white racial body as providential in design and purpose, while he tied national stability and growth to the hereditary perfection of this body.

In addition to the difference just described, there are two other significant departures between Bushnell and Beecher's theisms. First, unlike Bushnell, Beecher emphasized the propagative harm caused by degenerate whites, with Beecher's theism underscoring a concern over developmental disparities within the white race. Second, following his subscription to evolutionism, Beecher's theism was preoccupied with a kind of root or base animality that circumscribed the unfolding of the divine nature. Both of these departures signal important adjustments within racial theism as it developed over the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As previously mentioned, Beecher imagined a kind of propagative diversity within races, with different socio-economic classes representing discrete stocks within an intra-racial spectrum. Beecher conceived all human races as being stretched over a developmental continuum involving several stages. Taken as discrete units, races could be hierarchized, with one race (e.g., the white race) being supposedly more advanced in terms of its overall development than others. But considered individually, each race consisted of distinct stocks or

⁶⁸ Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), pp. 87-119.

kinship groups that were different with respect to their development. Beecher seemed especially concerned with degenerate white stocks whose supposed sinfulness marked their developmental inferiority and kept them from unfolding their higher potential. This is why Beecher insisted that the perfection of the race required that one “purge out vast amounts of the stock from which comes sin,”⁶⁹ thereby suggesting that the white race could only be perfected if certain degenerate classes were eliminated from the racial stock. Thus, unlike Bushnell, Beecher’s theism supported a form of discrimination that targeted the deleterious influence of degenerate whites, who, by the hereditarian logic of his theism, had biologically forfeited their biopolitical right to participate in the ongoing perfection of the race and the advance of God’s kingdom on earth.

In this aspect, Beecher’s theism presages the emergence of what one scholar of eugenics refers to as “eugenic racism,” which involves a “genetic understanding of race.” Rather than invoking “a fixed typology of qualitative differences,” Stefan Kühl argues that eugenic racism viewed human races as developmental continuums consisting of procreative “unities” or groups. These groups signal biological differences or even disparate stages of advancement *within* a specific race. For Kühl, eugenic racism helps to explain why twentieth century American eugenicists were so concerned about seeking out and eliminating degenerate white stocks. Eugenic racism, Kühl maintains, supported the development, promotion, and enactment of twentieth century eugenic procedures like sterilization, which targeted white degenerates in order to eliminate negative traits within the white racial body as a whole. As Kühl succinctly puts it, “Eugenic racism [...] is the demarcation of certain elements within a particular race, followed by attempts to reduce these elements through discriminatory policies.”⁷⁰ We see the kernel of this

⁶⁹ Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 216.

kind of discrimination and violence in Beecher's racial theism, which was premised upon the developmental concept of unfolding and which provided a theistic framework for explaining why certain whites should be encouraged to reproduce and why others should be kept from doing so. His work therefore augurs modernists in the early twentieth century who sought to publicly rationalize negative eugenic policies like compulsory sterilization on the grounds of racial theism.

Beecher's Impact on Protestant Modernism

Beecher's racial theism presaged the rise of the American eugenics movement by several decades, yet nucleated within it were ideas that would prove fundamental to eugenic thought and practice. Most important was the notion that degeneracy represented a moral and spiritual affront to God's propagative designs for the race. In important ways, his theism provided the germ for the development of Anglo-American eugenics as a popular movement.

In a sermon that he preached for the America Eugenics Society on May 17, 1926, for example, W.F. Butler, a Methodist minister from Chandler, Arizona, declared the following to the Salt River Valley Ministers Association: "God has revealed and experience shows that in the world of human kind Christlike qualities are the more lasting. It is the meek, rather than the cruel, the vicious and the immoral, who are to inherit the earth."⁷¹ In making such a statement, Butler followed Beecher in insisting that meekness and evolutionary fitness were more or less the same thing. Like Beecher, Butler believed in a God who worked within and through evolution and who sought to build his kingdom on earth through the propagation of a righteous

⁷⁰ Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 71.

⁷¹ "Butler, W.F.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

race. Following his nineteenth century predecessor, Butler maintained that evolution worked by advantaging the morally upright while disadvantaging (and even destroying) the immoral and corrupt. Evolution thereby ensured that the racial body developed upwardly, with Butler insisting that the race was heading toward the evolutionary perfection embodied by Christ.

As it developed as a professional and popular movement in the early twentieth century United States, eugenics was understood as an evolutionary struggle against the human animal. It promised to eradicate the sources of degeneracy that impeded the upward process of evolution. Degeneracy itself was understood in animalistic terms. Scientific professionals and clergymen alike comprehended degeneracy as a matter of devolution, that is, as a hereditary condition in which baser instincts prevailed against the higher faculties or in which the higher faculties were too feeble to counteract instinctual impulses. Hence, degeneracy was nearly universally referred to as “feeble-mindedness.” The term circulated widely in professional and popular circles as shorthand for the idea that the degenerate lacked what was properly human –namely, mental and moral faculties. As a struggle against degeneracy, Anglo-American eugenics promised a more righteous embodiment for the race, which testifies to the fact that evolutionary fitness was universally understood by affluent whites in terms of moral strength. Race uplift thus described a process of eliminating the hereditary condition of moral torpidity.

Just like Beecher had decades before, twentieth century modernist ministers like Butler viewed the elimination of degeneracy as part of a moral struggle for a higher moral comportment for the race. Believing that modern institutions like prisons, poorhouses, and asylums were breaking God’s evolutionary work by allowing degeneracy to increase, Butler argued that God was issuing modern civilization a warning, “written not upon a wall but in the germ plasm of human beings.” God, Butler cautioned his congregants, “is measuring your racial span and

bringing it to an end [...] Your civilization will be divided and engulfed by a wave of barbarism.” Butler preached his sermon over forty years after Beecher’s discourses on evolutionism, but he drew upon one of the central promises propounded by Beecher’s racial theism. The great struggle of extrication worked by violent means, but its process was ultimately the work of a compassionate God who, through his infinite love, sought to unfold a higher spiritual nature within humanity. Butler supported the eugenic struggle against degeneracy because it assisted God’s loving work to evolve Christ-like qualities within the race.

CHAPTER 3: THE PROBLEM OF RACE DEGENERACY: NEWELL DWIGHT HILLIS AND RACIAL THEISM AT THE CENTURY'S TURN

“For some reason the soul now has dust upon its wings. The din of the street, the roar and rattle of wagons, have drowned out the still small voice of God. Indeed, weary and disgusted, men run fussily about, sickened with life's excitements, yet ever seeking new pleasures. Multitudes are overwrought and incapable of nobler joys.”

-Newell Dwight Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed*, 1898

Introduction

In his welcoming address at the First National Conference on Race Betterment, John Harvey Kellogg opened by thanking the modernist Protestant clergyman, Newell Dwight Hillis, for first suggesting the event. “I wish to tell you that if you esteem it a privilege to gather here for the discussion of great questions which concern the welfare of the race,” Kellogg declared, “you are most of all indebted to our greatly esteemed friend, the eminent Doctor Hillis, of Plymouth Church, for it was he who last summer suggested to me and to other members of the Central Committee the idea of this Conference.”¹ Convening at Kellogg's Sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, on January 8, 1914, the purpose of the Conference was to “assemble evidence as to the extent to which degenerative tendencies are actively at work in America, and, to promote agencies for race betterment.”² With degeneracy broadly referring to hereditarily diminished moral, intellectual, or physical capacities, the Conference drew professionals from a variety of fields in which degeneracy had emerged as an important medico-political problem,

¹ John Harvey Kellogg, Address of Welcome to the Conference,” in *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 1.

² Stephen Smith, “President's Address,” in *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 5.

including social reform, medicine, public health, eugenics, and, most notably, eugenics. Hillis' interest in the problem of degeneracy is confirmed not only by the fact that he first advocated for the Conference, but also by the leading role that he played in its organization and execution. Hillis served as a vice-president and, along with prominent figures in medicine and social reform like Kellogg, Irving Fisher, and Jacob Riis, as a member of the Conference's Executive Committee.

Hillis initiated and organized the Conference as part of his lifelong commitment to redefining and retooling Christianity for the fight against race degeneracy, which he understood as a propagative condition of evolutionary consequence, on the one hand, and as an issue of national significance, on the other. At a moment when the public debate about race degeneracy was increasingly dominated by the "hard" hereditarian framework of mainline eugenics, Hillis sought to keep the political problem of race betterment rooted in a Christian ontology of race propagation. Throughout his writings during the first and second decades of the twentieth century, Hillis sought to redefine Christianity as the "art of right living," as a "science of man building,"³ and as a guide to the "higher spiritual life,"⁴ arguing that the solution to degeneracy and thus the road to national prosperity lay with individuals pledging themselves to what he once called the "hygienics of spiritual and mental nature."⁵ Hillis' attempt to transform Christianity into spiritual hygienics reflects his commitments as a modernist Protestant minister who sought to ontologically reconcile Christianity and evolution in the common purpose of race betterment.

³ Newell Dwight Hillis, "Influence of the Invisible; Supreme Need of Man's Life," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 2, 1907.

⁴ Newell Dwight Hillis, "The Reconciliation Between Science and Religion," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 24, 1901.

⁵ Newell Dwight Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1898), 27.

At the time of the Conference, Hillis was minister of the nationally renowned Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, where he had succeeded Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbott as pastor. American religious historians identify Hillis as a progressive reformer and a modernist Protestant minister.⁶ As a theological modernist, Hillis sought to reconcile Christianity with social Darwinism and higher criticism. In modernizing Christianity, Hillis clearly saw himself as continuing a theological and professional tradition initiated by Beecher, one that turned to evolutionary thought in order to reimagine Christianity as a “system to make men.”⁷ Hillis followed his towering nineteenth century predecessor in characterizing “natural man” as the product of a long, divinely ordained evolutionary process, while describing evolution as an inherently progressive movement “toward intelligence, genius, beauty, health, happiness, and universal culture and character.”⁸ Indeed, Hillis believed that evolution was “God’s way of doing things,”⁹ while, drawing conclusions much like Beecher’s, he argued that evolution transformed Christianity into “the science of man building.”¹⁰ In his capacity as minister at Plymouth Church, Hillis became a powerful and well-connected public figure who labored to elaborate and publicize this new mission for modern Christianity.

⁶ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of it All 1893-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 36.

⁷ In a speech in which Beecher argued that Christianity and evolution had the same purpose, Beecher insisted, “[r]eligion is the art of putting men on to an anvil and hammering them out into perfect manhood.” Beecher argued that there was no difference between this conceptualization of Christianity and the evolutionary theory expounded by Herbert Spencer. Newell Dwight Hillis, ed., *Lectures and Orations by Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1913), 316.

⁸ Hillis, “Influence of the Invisible.”

⁹ Hillis, “The Reconciliation Between Science and Religion.”

¹⁰ Hillis, “Influence of the Invisible.”

Like Beecher, Hillis was influenced by Hebert Spencer. Spencer's ideas allowed Hillis to moralize evolutionary advancement as a matter of individual initiative and development, with the habits, or, in Hillis' idiom, the "soul culture," of one generation positively or negatively impacting the comportments of future generations.¹¹ Spencer envisioned personal character as the vehicle of evolutionary uplift, a viewpoint that, as far as Hillis was concerned, left room for the influence of Christianity in both the transformation of individual lives and the regeneration of the race. In embracing the Spencerian evolutionism, Hillis was forced to square with Spencer's notion of the "survival of the fittest" and thus the evolutionary value of death as a selective force. Yet while Hillis accepted the elimination of the unfit as a law of nature and, therefore, as something in accordance with God's will,¹² he was more often inclined to see the social burden of unfitness as a challenge to Christianity to transform the weak, sickly, and "ignorant" classes and thus make the social body a more efficient "organism."¹³

Anglo-American Protestants and the Problem of Race Degeneracy

At the turn of the twentieth century, a significant number of Protestant leaders in the United States and Britain began to define race degeneracy as a religious problem. The development testifies to the extent to which Protestant religiosity had become tangled up with

¹¹ Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed*, 25.

¹² Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 115. In his paper for the Conference, Hillis wrote, "Mother Nature is kind and tender to the obedient, but she is a stern mother to the disobedient, and she gets rid of the unfit as a form of social pity and mercy." Newell Dwight Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," in *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 354.

¹³ In reflecting upon the unfitness of the "great under-mass of human society," Beecher argued that American civilization is "like a gouty man; he may be good at the top and all the way down, but his feet are not good and he cannot walk." Thus, "[t]here can be no prosperity that leaves at the bottom a section of ignorance nearly equal in numbers to that in the middle or top of society." Hillis, *Lectures and Orations by Henry Ward Beecher*, 52-61.

hereditarian questions related to evolutionism and race. It also underscores how much Protestant leaders had become committed to the idea that God sought to realize his redemptive purposes through race propagation. In the United States, race degeneracy challenged the heightening sense of racial election shared by Anglo-American racial theists at the century's turn, especially their perceived providential role in the Christianization of the world. But race degeneracy was not exclusively tied to white Protestant imperialism. It more broadly challenged racial theists' conceptions of social order and Christian progress, conceptions that could be just as concerned with domestic problems related to industrialization and urbanization as they were with imperial expansion.

An early treatment of race degeneracy as a religious problem appeared with Josiah Strong's 1893 work, *The New Era*, a book that followed his incredibly popular 1885 nationalistic treatise, *Our Country*. In both works, Strong identified Christian progress with the march of Anglo-Saxon civilization, effectively arguing that Anglo-Saxons had a mandate from God to carry "its civilization, like a ring of Saturn –a girdle of light, -around the globe."¹⁴ Subscribing to evolutionism, Strong imagined race propagation as a Christian method of progress, but he believed that Christian civilization often undermined this method. In *The New Era*, Strong argued that, through charity and eleemosynary institutions aimed at the moral and physical reform of individuals, Christian civilization perpetuated the "weak in body and mind." The Christian impulse to protect the abject thwarted God's evolutionary plan by allowing the "weak members of civilized society to perpetuate their kind." "No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals," Strong averred, "will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the

¹⁴ Josiah Strong, *The New Era: or The Coming of the Kingdom* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1893), 69.

race.”¹⁵ In asserting that Christians had a duty to eliminate the weak, Strong was promoting social Darwinism. But he was also arguing that, as a divine method, race propagation must necessarily eliminate the sources of degeneracy that undermined it. The propagation of weakness vitiated the race, qualified its sovereignty, and thwarted its redemptive mission. Strong’s work has been cited to document the development of Anglo-American “muscular Christianity,”¹⁶ as his social Darwinism was animated by an aversion to weakness that he often expressed in gendered terms.¹⁷ Indeed, Strong’s work evinces important ways in which the struggle against race degeneracy mobilized Christian rhetorics and affectations of manhood.

For Strong, degeneracy preponderated within the lower strata of white society and within the ranks of immigrants who were coming to the United States in larger and larger numbers at the century’s turn. His racial theism, which supposed that the Anglo-Saxon represented a superior race both morally and spiritually and which tasked this race with the building of a global Christian civilization, supported the approaches that he recommended for eliminating degeneracy. In the first case, he believed that the “better elements of society,” which Strong associated with the “higher classes,” must in self-defense level up the lower.¹⁸ This entailed religious, educational, and economic strategies aimed at augmenting the mental, moral, and spiritual competencies of the poor. In the second case, he believed that the country ought to adapt a more exclusive immigration policy so as to ensure the “inferior blood” that is “now being injected into the veins of the nation [...] every day of every year” does not corrupt the Anglo-

¹⁵ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁶ Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 36-39.

¹⁷ Josiah Strong, *The Times and Young Men* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1901).

¹⁸ Strong, *The New Era*, 35.

Saxon racial body.¹⁹ Strong imagined these approaches as a necessary part of protecting the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and preserving its providential mission to build a global Christian civilization.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the problem of race degeneracy had become an important component of the social gospel, which testifies to the fact that Protestant leaders were beginning to associate race degeneracy with a domestic agenda that was primarily focused on alleviating issues related to industrialization. Clergymen who identified with the social gospel were especially concerned about the deleterious affect that industrialized society was having upon racial development. The issue of race propagation allowed social gospellers to frame industrial problems as religious concerns precisely because these problems threatened the normal, or Christian, development of the country.

Social gospellers challenged Americans and their professional colleagues to eliminate the sources of degeneracy, which they associated with sinfulness. These sources included habits and behaviors exacerbated by industrial life, especially intemperance, sexual vice (e.g., prostitution), gambling, and criminality. Social gospellers associated all of these behaviors with moral weakness. Like Henry Ward Beecher a few decades earlier, those who embraced social Darwinism preached a natural law that assumed evolutionary progresses worked through the gradual elimination of moral torpidity. Indeed, evolutionary fitness was understood primarily in terms of moral fortitude, which demonstrates how Beecher provided a template for social gospellers for reconciling social Darwinism and degeneracy with Christian principles. When social gospellers maintained that the weak had to be eliminated in their work to advance God's kingdom in industrialized America, they first and foremost meant the morally enfeebled. Moral

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

enfeeblement (popularly referred to as “feeble-mindedness”), they argued, was propagated into the race through the reproduction and perpetuity of the criminal and pauper classes. Social gospelers often saw the struggle against race degeneracy as a fight against these classes as sources of immorality that vitiated the race from within and stymied the advance of God’s kingdom.

Samuel Z. Batten, for example, was a prominent Baptist minister from Lincoln, Nebraska, who made the struggle against race degeneracy an important part of his social gospel platform. Along with Walter Rauschenbush, Batten was one of the founding members of the social gospel movement.²⁰ His 1909 social gospel treatise, *The Christian State*, attempted to think about statecraft as an apparatus through which one could achieve the “perfection of the collective life of humanity.”²¹ As part of its ministrations, Batten argued, the Christian state must necessarily eliminate the sources of degeneracy. The state is under “obligation to remove the causes which make the criminal,” Batten averred. The state must take “adequate precautions” to “prevent the continuous creation of such dependent and defective classes.” Batten advocated “prevention” over “reformation,” which meant that he believed that the state was bound to block the propagative cycle that produced degeneracy within the race. In a 1908 article published in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Batten argued that degeneracy was a propagative issue and that the struggle to eliminate it therefore necessitated a partnership between Christianity and science. “In fact as time goes by the Christian spirit will call to its aid scientific knowledge and medical skill,” Batten opined, so that “modern society, having an intelligent concern for its own

²⁰ In 1910, Batten and Mathews collaborated on the “Social Service Series,” a book projected attempting to define and outline the social mission of Christianity in modern times. Box 5, Folder 6. Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

²¹ Samuel Z. Batten, *The Christian State: The State, Democracy, and Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Griffith and Rowland Press, 1909), 411.

interests and striving for the progress and perfection of the race, will not be willing to allow the unfit and defective to survive and perpetuate their kind to the disadvantage and detriment of society.”²²

Race degeneracy was often framed in overtly classist and racist terms. Its theorists often argued that race degeneracy was rooted in “differential fertility.” The race was in decline and perhaps even on the verge of extinction, the argument went, because those of the best American racial stock were being out-reproduced by poor whites and immigrants, people who, given their supposedly impoverished heredity, perpetuated degeneracy through reproduction. The argument testifies to the widespread assumption at the time that moral weakness, social abjectness, and bad heredity were all interrelated. The crisis of “race suicide,” which portended the decline of old stock Anglo-America and the extinction of the American way of life, was especially acute in the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The issue of differential fertility led many Americans, Protestant clergy included, to speculate that the native stock would be overwhelmed and ultimately effaced by more fecund populations.

The moral crisis of racial decline brought prominent ministers like Batten and Newell Dwight Hillis to mainline eugenics. Eugenics proposed practical measures to correct the problem of differential fertility and restore the rightful and “natural” relations of power that were supposed to exist between the morally strong and the morally weak. These measures included immigration restriction and the segregation –and even asexualization –of the unfit, measures that promised to end the propagation of degeneracy and to bring moral order to industrial society. Protestant clergymen in both the United States and England –two countries that had strong public

²² Samuel Z. Batten, “The Redemption of the Unfit,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 2 (Sept., 1908) 242.

support for eugenics –began to see the churches and eugenics as partners in a modern struggle for moral purity against the hereditarian sources of human sinfulness.

The problem of race degeneracy compelled many Protestant leaders to think about how religion could become a racially regenerative force. Their focus often fell on the ways in which Christianity could normatively guide reproduction by strengthening the social significance marriage among the affluent classes. In 1912, F.B. Meyer, Chairman of the National Council of Public Morals for Great Britain and Greater Britain, published a small book entitled, *Religion and Race Regeneration*, with Cassell and Company in New York. The Council's motto underscored the nationalistic dimensions of race betterment. "The foundations of National Glory [sic] are set in the homes of the people. They will only remain unshaken while the family life of our race and nation is strong, simple, and pure."²³

Meyer argued that religion was uniquely suited to lead the work of race regeneration, as the natural purpose of religion was to guide the instinctual impulse for marriage and family. Religion alone, Meyer insisted, "gives ultimate authority, permanence, and driving power; she alone deals with aspects of human nature which are fundamental to man's well-being and progress; and she alone has that note of universality which is characteristic of the race-instinct." "The religious and racial instincts are alike universal," Meyer reasoned. "They spring from the same source, move towards the same end, fulfill the same purposes." Religion, therefore, should lead the fight against race degeneracy by guiding the "racial instinct" to the noble purpose of Christian marriage, where such an instinct would find its "final consummation and crown."²⁴

²³ F.B. Meyer, *Religion and Race Regeneration* (New York: Cassell and Co., 1912), vi.

²⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

Meyer proposed his theory as an answer to the problem of differential fertility, which was rooted in the general confusion that modern society introduced with respect to sex and family life. Christianity could normalize reproduction among the affluent classes by making the “symbol of mother and child” its most sacred sign.²⁵ This made Christianity and eugenics partners in the propagation of a better race, Meyers suggested. Christianity would supply the emotive energy necessary for re-sanctifying marriage and family, while eugenics would supply scientific methods and knowledge of heredity in the great work of race regeneration.²⁶

Meyer’s work testifies to the extent to which middle class Christianity in Britain and the United States had become tangled up with race propagation. For Meyer, the most sacred function of the church was the hallowing of marriage, a function that anchored religion in natural law and gave it an important role in the ministration of social life. “The Church,” he declared, “abdicates her function if she does not fulfill this ancient role.”²⁷ The church was to adapt this ancient role to modern problems by correcting a sex desire gone awry. The seductive attractions of urbanized life, Meyers reasoned, confused the sex instinct and detached it from its sacred purpose –namely, marriage and family. In becoming detached from these divine ends, the sex instinct threatened the life of the race by introducing disease and corrupting the body. Desire, Meyer wrote, should first and foremost be directed towards love and “secondly [towards] the perpetuation of the race.”²⁸ When it was directed toward these ends, desire served as the very foundation for social order and promised to restore social harmony. As a racially regenerative force, Christianity had

²⁵ Ibid., 34.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Ibid., 34.

²⁸ Ibid., 53.

to train this desire to seek its higher purpose: it “becomes the Church to bestir herself, and prepare a regenerated race to enter and possess the new era; and with the loftier conception of wedlock there shall come a statelier Eden back to men.”²⁹

Protestant leaders defined race degeneracy as a religious problem because they had come to see propagation as the natural function of religion. Religious authority, which was an authority rooted in natural law, was a power directed towards racial development and national advance. It was a power that defined itself in terms of the propagation of bodies, especially the moral faculties. Race degeneracy brought many Anglo-American ministers to view the churches and eugenics as natural allies in the quest to eliminate moral weakness and to bring order to modern urban society.

Hillis and Race Degeneracy

By the time of the 1914 Conference, Newell Dwight Hillis had developed a theory of degeneracy that accorded both with his Lamarckian sensibilities and his ideological and professional commitments as a Protestant clergyman. Although Hillis accepted the idea that degeneracy resulted when the natural destruction of unfitness was thwarted, he preferred to see degeneracy as moral and spiritual unfitness that resulted from the disuse of specific faculties. In an 1898 work entitled, *How the Inner Light Failed*, for example, Hillis ventured an “analysis of the causes of religious atrophy.”³⁰ Employing a Lamarckian understanding of heredity, Hillis advanced the following maxim: “With nature and God one law is inexorable –he who disuses or misuses a faculty must lose it.”³¹ Arguing that the “reality of the religious life [is] the logical

²⁹ Ibid., 62.

³⁰ Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed*, 25.

³¹ Ibid., 9.

flower and fruitage of the great process of evolution,³² Hillis believed that religious atrophy was a degenerative force: “Like the faculty of reason, of judgment, or of memory, the religious sense becomes strong through culture and exercise, or weak through neglect and want of nourishment.”³³ The principal task of Christianity was, therefore, to reawaken and strengthen the spiritual sense, with Hillis declaring, “The problem of our day is the problem of the revival of the spiritual faculty in order to the bringing of the higher life and arts.”³⁴

In identifying a spiritual faculty apart from other faculties like reason, judgment, and memory, Hillis was trying to protect the authenticity of religious expression from rationalism, empiricism, and the threats of modern naturalism. But Hillis was also endeavoring to show that the spiritual sense was fundamental to the advance of American civilization. It is unclear what, precisely, Hillis had in mind by a spiritual faculty, but it definitely referred to the moral and aesthetic ability to know what “clean living” entailed, the capacity to appreciate the beauty and integrity of such living, and the potential to seek it for oneself. Most generally, spiritual faculty referred to the capacity to “subordinate things that are low to faculties that are high.”³⁵ More specifically, however, the spiritual sense referred to the desire to seek God, which was not a dogmatic exercise but a meditative and contemplative one. Throughout his career, Hillis endorsed a Christianity that emphasized “soul-culture” and mental and moral activities that forced people to withdraw from the frenzy of trade and commerce and to enter a space in which they could reflect upon eternal things. Thus, for example, Hillis endorsed Bible reading, with

³² Hillis, “The Reconciliation Between Science and Religion.”

³³ Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed*, 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³⁵ Hillis, “Influence of the Invisible.”

Hillis viewing the Bible as a “guidebook to right living” and the teacher of a “few great simplicities and eternal verities.”³⁶

Hillis’ 1898 work, *How the Inner Light Failed*, represents an extended study of degeneracy from the perspective of a clergyman. Hillis argued that the pastimes and preoccupations of modern life were to blame for the growing atrophy of the spiritual sense, which led to a breakdown in morality, especially at the lower levels of American society. “The tendency of modern life,” Hillis averred, “is to make men spiritual dwarfs, so that multitudes who are physically matured remain children in the spiritual realm.”³⁷ Challenging the eugenic claim that national life was decreasing because old stock Americans were failing to reproduce themselves, Hillis asserted that the real issue with respect to degeneracy rested not with the decline of this stock per se, but with atrophy of the higher religious ideals that they had championed. The “hygienics of the spiritual and the mental nature” that were a part of Puritan life, Hillis wailed, were becoming “almost unknown in our land.” (27) For Hillis, the fight against degeneracy thus revolved around the inculcation of American religious ideals that could grow the spiritual faculties of the multitudes.

Hillis followed Beecher in viewing human nature as a struggle against animality and in associating animality with human organismic existence. In *How the Inner Light Failed*, for example, Hillis described the fall of Samson as a failed struggle against his animal nature.

Samson’s “passions,” Hillis wrote, “were fiends that lurked in ambush within his body. Once the

³⁶ It is worth noting what Hillis included among such verities: “God, and His all-loving providence; Christ as the revelation of the divinest and ideal elements in the soul, a master, a teacher, and savior; the peril of disobedience to the law; liberty through obedience, the supremacy of conscience, the law of love, service and self-sacrifice, and the hope of personal immortality as the recovery out of the mistakes and sins of the life that now is.” Hillis, “The Reconciliation Between Science and Religion.”

³⁷ Hillis, *How the Inner Light Failed*, 30.

tension of his moral nature was loosened he plunged into sin.”³⁸ “The essence of the wretched story,” Hillis concluded, “is that, sinning against his finer feelings, slowly the spiritual sense in the man had been destroyed until, in the pathetic words of the writer, it is said: ‘Samson wist [sic] not that God had departed from him.’”³⁹ As his interpretation of Samson’s fall suggests, Hillis believed that humans were a composite of spiritual and animal forces, with Hillis insisting that the decline of a culture led to the diminishment of the spiritual and the aggrandizement of the animal, or to the privileging of the primitive, instinctual, or baser components of human nature over its divine-like attributes. This evolutionary framework provided Hillis with a register for understanding racial differences. What distinguished one racial stock from another was its propensity to animality or, on the contrary, its ability to transcend its animal nature. This evolutionary framework also defined the purpose of religion, which was to strengthen the spiritual faculties and to grow them into maturity. Doing so had a positive propagative effect on the development of a race and facilitated the upward evolution of life. Developing the spiritual faculties over the course of several generations had an inborn influence on human nature in so far as it diminished the animal within. Stoking the “inner light,” in other words, would lift the human organism into a higher plane of existence.

Hillis imagined that, as a guide to clean living, Christianity could not only reawaken spiritual faculties, but moreover, that Christianity was fundamental to race betterment as a project for ensuring the perpetuity and advance of Christian civilization. As a “science” dealing with the subjective space of moral ideals, Christianity was fundamental to civilizational advance because, as Hillis saw it, “The only way to develop the civilization on the outside is to develop

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Ibid., 8.

manhood on the inside.”⁴⁰ As I discuss below, there were many at the 1914 Conference who would have joined Hillis in seeing a direct link between Christian righteousness, health, and national prosperity.

Hillis’ participation at the first Race Betterment Conference has been cited to document the enthusiasm and support that many modernist Protestant ministers demonstrated for eugenics in the early twentieth century.⁴¹ It is important to keep in mind, however, that Hillis rejected the hard hereditarianism advanced by mainline eugenicists. In fact, that he initiated and helped organize the Conference indicates that he was more interested in setting the debate over race betterment on what he believed were its proper epistemological grounds than he was in heeding the rising orthodoxy in race betterment advanced by mainliners.

During the same year as the Conference, for example, Hillis served on an expert advisory committee sponsored by the Eugenics Record Office, a mainline eugenics agency. With Hillis participating as an expert on “religion and morals,” the purpose of the committee was to “study and to report on the best practical means of cutting off the defective germ-plasm in the American population.”⁴² Led by the now notorious Harry H. Laughlin, one of the primary purposes of the committee was to explore and advocate the segregation and sterilization of the unfit as a practical measure for eliminating degeneracy.⁴³ Hillis was drawn to the results promised by mainline eugenicists with respect to race betterment. He even clearly supported the segregation and

⁴⁰ Newell Dwight Hillis, *The Fortune of the Republic and Other Addresses: Upon the America of To-Day and Tomorrow* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1906), 98.

⁴¹ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 87-88.

⁴² Harry H. Laughlin, *Bulletin No. 10A: Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population: The Scope of the Committee’s Work* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Eugenics Record Office, 1914), 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 61-64.

sterilization of the unfit as a means to ending the propagative cycle of degeneracy. Yet he ultimately refused to believe the eugenics' tenet that Christian nurture was more or less powerless to transform human nature, with Hillis insisting that Christian institutions possessed the power to resolve the issue of racial decline.

This was the message of the paper that Hillis delivered for the 1914 Race Betterment Conference. Entitled, "Factory Degeneration," Hillis opened his paper by declaring that the "[t]ime has gone by when we can say any longer that race degeneracy is simply a bugaboo created by pessimists and alarmists." As Hillis exhorted his fellow Conference participants, "The simple fact that a tide of degeneracy is rolling in upon us, and the time has come to recognize the fact that unless drastic measures are taken, the whole standard of civilization will have to change in order to avoid race extinction."⁴⁴ While Hillis was supposed to talk specifically about how the factory classes propagated degeneracy, he instead reflected upon a "singular breakdown in and decay of morals" that affected all classes, rich and poor, native and immigrant,⁴⁵ viewing the source of this "tide of degeneracy" as a failure of Americans at all social levels to live up to the higher ideals of Christianity. Observing the impact of this plague of degeneracy upon the evolution of the race, he stated, "One half of our people are God-fearing, law-loving, pure-living, and their children and descendants are growing taller, handsomer, healthier, happier. The other half is living for pleasure, the body and animalism, and their descendants are deteriorating in health, and will finally drop out of the world."⁴⁶ Hillis decided to close his paper with a cautionary word about degeneracy that waxed optimistic with respect to the prospects of the

⁴⁴ Hillis, "Factory Degeneration," 353.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 351.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 354.

race: “The people are waking up. There is to be an elect group, an aristocracy of health. Instead of the race breaking down, there is to be a new stock, taller, stronger, healthier, handsomer. [Yet] it is for the people of this nation to remember that he who sows to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.” Hillis intended his conclusion to apply to all Americans, while, in contrast to mainline eugenicists, he trusted in the power of Christian institutions to eradicate degeneracy, uplift immigrants, and “reap health, happiness, peace and social prosperity.”⁴⁷

The Race Betterment Conference

In helping to organize the First Conference on Race Betterment, Hillis endeavored to initiate an informed and inclusive debate about the nature of, and appropriate solutions to, race degeneracy,⁴⁸ which he, like his colleagues, saw as one of the preeminent political problems of the day. Given its inclusivity, the Conference can be seen as a microcosm of a larger professional discussion within the religious, medical, and scientific communities about how to secure the moral, intellectual, and physical evolution of the population. Although the Conference sought to place the problem of race betterment on firm scientific footing,⁴⁹ the construction of race betterment as a political problem included both an implicit and explicit commitment to Christianity as a set of spiritual ideals for guiding evolutionary work. In this respect, the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 355.

⁴⁸ In her 2004 work, *Preaching Eugenics*, Christine Rosen catalogues the following diversity of reform agendas that were presented at the Conference and thus categorized under the rubric of race betterment: “the prohibition of alcohol, anti-spitting ordinances, nationwide better baby contests, more widespread eugenic education efforts, stricter immigration laws, advice on how women could ‘suppress’ brothels, calls for women’s suffrage, and better meat and milk inspection.” Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90.

⁴⁹ Smith, “President’s Address,” 7.

Conference underscores three important aspects with respect to the role that liberal Protestant Christianity played in early twentieth century biopolitics.

First, professionals and progressive reformers (including ministers like Hillis) could hardly construct degeneracy as a political problem apart from a hereditarian framework that tied fitness to the perpetuity of the nation. Hence, one of the primary purposes of the Conference was to investigate degeneracy as the “loss or impairment of the qualities peculiar to the race,”⁵⁰ which involved treating the issue of degeneracy as a political issue of national consequence. In this way, race betterment was a way of conceptually and affectively constructing public health as a biopolitical exigency. In fact, it was a way of constructing public health as the political problem, *par excellence*. Yet as a political problem, degeneracy was understood as much as a breakdown in morality and idealism as it was a matter of the physical deterioration of the body politic. This meant that many professionals and progressive reformers like Hillis often saw race betterment as a religious issue of moral and spiritual decay just as much as a physiological one.

Second, the Conference proceedings indicate that the appropriate epistemology for approaching degeneracy as a hereditarian issue was unsettled within the medical, scientific, and progressive reform communities, as advocates of “soft” heredity clashed with proponents of “hard” heredity over the best way to ensure the evolutionary development of the race. Indeed, representatives of “euthenics,” who subscribed to a Lamarckian understanding of heredity, cautioned Conference attendees by insisting that any lasting program for the evolutionary advance of the race had to be firmly rooted in a science dedicated to the “betterment of living conditions” in addition to direct eugenic interventions into human heredity.⁵¹ The palpable

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

defensiveness demonstrated by advocates of eugenics with respect to mainline eugenicists' claims underscores the fact that professional eugenicists were beginning to dominate the race betterment debate. (By the 1920s, they would have all but vanquished Lamarckians from the conversation about race betterment.) Yet nearly all Conference attendees agreed that the promulgation of middle class Christian ideals of moral righteousness, self-sacrifice, and industry were important goals of race betterment.

Finally, reconceived as a set of spiritual ideals that could inspire and direct human action, liberal Protestantism played an important role in the production of race betterment as a mode of "governmentality," which involved not only the development of public health as the principal object of modern, scientific statecraft, but also the production of a citizenry who self-identified and self-regulated as subjects of health.⁵² Put differently, Protestant Christianity assisted in the promulgation of health as both a moral system and an ethics of political belonging and enfranchisement.

For example, conceiving Christianity as a kind of hygienic piety, some Conference participants redefined religion through the subjective space of idealism and personal righteousness. Addressing the issue of sexual hygiene, the Secretary of the Iowa State Board of Health declared, "Christianity is the one plan ordained of God that will save, hence the inner life we live must be under the control of the teachings of the lowly Nazarene. [G]irls must be taught

⁵¹ Mrs. Melvil Dewey, "Eugenics and its Founder," in *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 99.

⁵² Foucault would develop the term "governmentality" over the course of his lectures at the Collège de France from 1977 to 1979. For an excellent development and application of Foucault's concept of "governmentality" with respect to the regulation of health in contemporary society, see Sarah Nettleton, "Governing the Risky Self: How to Become Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise," in *Foucault: Health and Medicine*, eds. Alan Petersen and Robin Bunton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 207-22.

the sacredness of their bodies, and men should learn that the honor of women is a God-given grace and not to be violated.”⁵³ The participant’s remarks suggest that the Christian belief in a personal God as well as Christian ideals of purity and righteousness were important ways in which Conference attendees sought to moralize race betterment as a practice of self-culture, while the remarks also underscore how these “pioneers” of public health and medicine attempted to reconcile their scientific professionalism with their liberal Protestant faiths.⁵⁴ The Conference’s organizers also saw the need for race betterment to be guided by spiritual ideals, with some justifying the moral and ethical aspects of race betterment by appealing to the production of a more spiritual race. Quoting the co-discoverer of natural selection and defender of spiritualism, Alfred Russell Wallace, Stephen Smith opened the Conference by asking, “[W]hat more pointed lesson can be taught as to the conduct of our own lives and our duties to the race than that this life is ‘in preparation for the enduring spiritual life to which [the race] is destined’[?]”⁵⁵

In light of these points, Hillis’ work reflects broader trends within the development of modernism to re-conceptualize Christianity as a relevant and potent force in race betterment.

⁵³ Guilford H. Sumner, “Disease and its Prevention,” in *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 156.

⁵⁴ Here, I am following one of Pamela Klassen’s arguments in *Spirits of Protestantism* in which she insists, “[L]iberal Protestants have played an important role in the emergence of a biomedical system that is still undecided about whether health care is a capitalist project or a human right, or both.” Pamela Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism: Medicine, Healing, and Liberal Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 9-10.

⁵⁵ Smith, “President’s Address,” 7. Smith advanced the development of a “religious consciousness” as an important strategy in combatting degeneracy, citing the “power of Christian consciousness” to awaken to “activity [...] the most savage tribes into highly civilized communities” and arguing that said consciousness had the power to regenerate the “hopelessly” animal. *Ibid.*, 19.

Race betterment represented an opportunity for modernist ministers like Hillis to refashion and strengthen the power of Christianity in the fight against racial decline, making it possible to champion Christianity as the preeminent philosophy of self-government, or to use Hillis' idiom, as the highest art of right living.

Hillis and Racial Theism

Hillis' views on racial theism played a decisive role in his engagement with eugenics. On the one hand, Hillis believed that the descendants of colonial Anglo-America represented an elect racial stock, ordained to lead God's evolutionary work. On the other hand, Hillis believed that the *real* fruit of Anglo-American racial superiority lay not in its heredity but in its distinctive religious life, one that he believed persisted in American institutions and culture. In an article that he published in *The Atlanta Constitution* on February 14, 1901, and entitled, "The Reconciliation between Science and Religion," Hillis asserted his faith in the "reality of the religious life as the logical flower and fruitage of the great process of evolution."⁵⁶ This article of faith allowed Hillis to remain relatively unfazed by predictions of race suicide as the higher ideals of American culture, he believed, were firmly set to lead the American population out of the clutches of degeneracy. The evolutionary work of God to propagate a better human race should proceed not first and foremost through racially hygienic measures that attempted to normalize the declining fecundity of America's racially elect, but moreover, through the inculcation of the higher personal and social ideals of American religious life at all levels of society. Subscribing to a Lamarckian understanding of heredity that stressed the preeminence of culture over biology, Hillis believed that, over several generations and with careful effort,

⁵⁶ Hillis, "The Reconciliation between Science and Religion."

American religious ideals would solve the problem of degeneracy by unfolding a higher spiritual comportment in all classes and groups.

On February 27, 1919, Hillis responded to a popular eugenic tract entitled, “The Coming Extinction of the Mayflower Descendants” in a short editorial that he wrote for *The Atlanta Constitution*. As its title suggests, the tract argued that, given their present rate of reproduction, the descendants of the Mayflower would soon be extinct. Published to mark the three hundredth anniversary of the voyage of the Mayflower Pilgrims, the tract also advanced the biologicistic claim that American national life would die out along with the Mayflower descendants. The kind and quality of American national life, the tract maintained, depended upon the perpetuation of those bodies that had helped produce it. In the opening of his editorial, Hillis agreed with the conclusion of the eugenic tract. The “Mayflower carried a political and spiritual cargo,” he wrote, “the most precious in the history of the world.” Indeed, Hillis continued, “The mere thought of the extinction of the old Puritan stock stirs alarm in all lovers of liberty and their native land.”⁵⁷

The hereditarian language that Hillis deployed to imagine the greatness of the Pilgrims as an elect stock testifies to the extent to which he maintained racially theistic ideas. “[O]ne drop of that blood,” Hillis insisted to his readers, “went further than any blood known to history.” Hillis believed that the Pilgrims (who he also referred to as “Puritans”) were hereditarily elect, representing the best religious minds that Europe had to offer. “All Europe was sifted for men of independent minds; then these original thinkers were sifted to obtain the Puritans, some of whom remained in England [...] and some of whom [...] came to this country.” Hillis then attested to the definitive role that the Pilgrims had played in the development of American national life. “To

⁵⁷ Newell Dwight Hillis, “The Coming Extinction of the Mayflower Descendants,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 27, 1919.

take the influence of these Puritans out of our history,” he maintained, “would be like taking Moses from the Jewish people, like taking Caesar out of Rome, or the Magna Charta out of England’s life.” After evincing the “influence of the Puritan blood” by listing all of the great men who had come out of a “single little town like Northampton, Massachusetts,” Hillis tersely concluded, “The extinction of this old Puritan stock would be a calamity to the world.”⁵⁸

While testifying to the biological superiority of Puritan stock, however, Hillis insisted that, despite their declining numbers, descendants of this illustrious American pedigree continued to influence American national life through their cultural legacy. The argument contradicted the thesis maintained by the eugenic tract, which, in a biologicistic idiom characteristic of mainline eugenics discourse, maintained that national life was disappearing along with the decline of old stock American pedigrees. “No one who has widely traveled in the forty-eight states of this country but realizes the immeasurable influence of the descendants of the Mayflower upon our education, our literature, our art, our science, our politics and our religion,” Hillis wrote, effectively arguing that the continued influence of the Pilgrims on national life should be measured not in terms of the biological perpetuity of their stock, but in terms of the impact that they continued to exert through the higher idealism of American culture. “In the United States,” Hillis reasoned, “the people are informed and trained by four things: conversation, the press and literature, political problems and religion. Now these are precisely the four realms in which the children of the Mayflower have wrought and made themselves immortal.”⁵⁹ While the descendants of the Pilgrims represented a providentially elect stock that possessed prodigious moral, spiritual, and intellectual gifts, the true measure of their influence

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

was not their blood or germ plasm but the influence they now immortally exerted through American cultural institutions.

Hillis believed that degeneracy represented a hereditary threat to the development of the country, a fact attested to not only by his involvement in the Race Betterment Conference but also his aforementioned participation in the ERO expert advisory committee organized by Harry Laughlin. Hillis' personal support for the eugenic initiatives recommended by the committee (e.g., sterilization of the unfit) was no doubt shaped by his racial theism and the idea that America needed to be protected from the hereditary threat of degeneracy. In the conclusion to its report (a report that we must believe Hillis himself endorsed), the committee made explicit the eugenic connection between national life and the protection of the white racial body: "If America is to escape the doom of nations generally, it must breed good Americans. The fall of every nation in history has been due to many causes, but always chiefest [*sic*] among these causes has been the decline of the national stock."⁶⁰ Yet while his racial theism justified his endorsement of eugenic interventions that sought to protect and preserve the national germ plasm, Hillis tended to champion a view of race uplift that located the source of American greatness in its culture and not, as eugenicists maintained, in its biology. As previously discussed, Hillis characteristically took a wider view of propagation, one that prioritized the inculcation of religious ideals as a means to uplifting degenerate bodies and for propagating national identity.

Hillis' engagement with eugenics testifies to the important ways in which the question of race propagation imbricated modernist and eugenic agendas. Modernists did not simply endorse eugenic initiatives out of respect for the growing influence of science, but moreover, because they believed that Christian ideals (and Anglo-American Protestant religious life more generally)

⁶⁰ Laughlin, *Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population*, 59.

had real consequences for the development of the national body. They assumed that heredity played an important role in the development of this body but many also continued to assume that, like Bushnell and Beecher, heredity was shaped by perpetual reciprocity between biology and culture. Thus, while physiology perpetuated innate differences between racial stocks, physiology was, for better or worse, always being reciprocally shaped by cultural influences. This meant that modernists like Hillis often embraced ideas that twenty-first century Americans would identify as racist. It also meant that they frequently insisted that the degenerative condition of a stock's biology was too great to be overcome by culture, a position that no doubt played a part in Hillis' endorsement of eugenic sterilization. But it is important to observe that, given their understanding of heredity as an inter-generationally open interplay between physiology and culture, modernists like Hillis were not committed to biological determinism in the same way mainline eugenicists were. Especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century, many modernists emphasized the importance of physiology while maintaining the preeminence of culture. This permitted modernists to read national identity and racial uplift as a relatively open nature-nurture dynamic. This is also what made it possible for religious leaders like Hillis to confidently assert that Anglo-American Christianity was a real and effective propagative power.

Modernist views on race overlapped with, but were ultimately separable from, their understanding of heredity. While mainline eugenics testifies to the fact that racism had become a scientifically respectable position during the early twentieth century, the varying sensibilities displayed by American clergymen with respect to race as a biological category underscore the fact that there were different kinds of racisms and, moreover, that these racisms corresponded with different scientific positions on the nature of heredity. Hillis, for example, dismissed

eugenicists' claim that miscegenation produced unbalanced progeny. In fact, he argued that race mixture produced stronger stocks of men. He also argued that all races were responsive to the higher ideals of Christianity, which contradicted eugenicists' claim that some races and stocks were beyond the pale of Christian civilization. As Hillis once avowed, "There are many pessimists who are alarmed at [increased immigration]. But let us take no counsel of crouching fear. If we do our duty, our free institutions will Americanize and Christianize them, and after the blood have been well mixed, there will stand forth in this republic the finest type of man, physical, that the world has ever seen."⁶¹ Hence, while frequently espousing views that twenty-first century Americans would identify as racist, Hillis' views on race were decidedly different than those espoused by leading mainline eugenicists, who insisted that the different inborn capacities for civilization possessed by various races were far less pliable. Hillis' biological perception of race coincided with his understanding of heredity and religion, with the former referring to something far more plastic than eugenic theories of race admitted and with the latter corresponding with a view of human nature that privileged the spiritual over the animal.

In 1906, Hillis published *The Fortune of the Republic and Other Addresses: Upon the America of To-day and To-morrow*. The book represents a series of reflections on degeneracy and its alleged impact upon American national life. Hillis consciously chose to write the book from an optimistic viewpoint and to counter prevailing pessimism regarding the inability of an industrializing American society to produce a better body politic. "Everywhere men are saying that the country is besotted, that men are sodden in materialism, that every man has his price, that graft is universal, and yet, at this very hour, the country is passing through the greatest moral and

⁶¹ Hillis, *The Fortune of the Republic*, 81.

intellectual awakening it has ever known.”⁶² Hillis countered many of eugenicists’ claims, but he was most forceful about challenging the impact that eugenicists claimed immigrants would have on American national life. While mainline eugenicists argued that immigrants represented the most depraved and degenerate elements of European stocks, Hillis averred, “These new peoples represent the best that the Old World has. Only the strong, the courageous, the self-reliant venture far from home, and dare.”⁶³

Hillis went so far as to insist that all of Europe and Asia could be dropped into the United States and successfully integrated into American life.⁶⁴ If we bring the influence of Anglo-American religious and cultural ideals to “bear upon men’s conduct,” Hillis declared, these new populations will lend strength to the arm and foot of the Republic, and its brain and mind and heart, but if we allow the people to go unchristianized and unamericanized [*sic*] we do so at our peril.”⁶⁵ Hillis’ point was that it was Anglo-American institutions and not Anglo-American heredity that defined the essence of the country and perpetuated national life. Through its institutions and drawing upon its religious and cultural ideals, native whites could craft a righteous body politic out of newly arrived immigrant populations. Hillis admitted that primitive or un-American customs might be intractably habituated in the bodies of first generation immigrants. Yet he maintained that their children would be pliable and assimilable. “Death removes the first generation of foreigners, but the schoolhouse makes their children genuinely American, while all the races are becoming one race, because all are scholars as well as patriots

⁶² Ibid., 6.

⁶³ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 82.

–intelligent, with hungry minds, alert, hospitable to every new truth and interest that concerns the people of the Republic.’’⁶⁶

Hillis’ arguments underscore the fact that modernists’ views on race were quite complicated. Clearly, Hillis subscribed to a biological concept of race. Hillis endorsed racial theism while at the same time arguing that the legacy of superior Anglo-American stock lay in its religio-cultural innovations and not in its heredity. He preached racial equality while at the same time praising some racial stocks as spiritually enlightened and denouncing others as depraved. During World War I, for example, he attempted to galvanize Americans against the “Huns” by describing the Germans as a degenerate people.⁶⁷ If there is any consistency in Hillis’ arguments it rests on his understanding of race propagation itself, which for him described an open and fluid relationship between nurture and nature and an abiding faith in the power of Anglo-American culture to lift the human out of the animal. For Hillis, race propagation did not first and foremost refer to a biological practice of race hygiene as it did for mainline eugenicists. Rather, in the face of a racially diversifying United States, it represented an opportunity for the higher idealism of American culture to shape a new body politic in the spiritual likeness of its founders.

Modernism in the Era of Mainline Eugenics

As a Christian discourse of race propagation, modernism offered powerful tools for engaging eugenics and defining the problem of degeneracy during the early twentieth century. Viewing Christianity as a method for growing a better body politic, modernists like Hillis developed solutions to the problem of degeneracy out of a commitment to updating and adapting

⁶⁶ Ibid. 35.

⁶⁷ Newell Dwight Hillis, “The Degenerate Photographs of the Huns,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1918. Newell Dwight Hillis, “Once a Hun, Always a Hun; ‘Can a Leopard Change its Spots?’,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1919.

Christianity to meet the unique conditions of modern life. As Hillis attests, in so doing they directly engaged eugenic arguments, ideas, and practices. Hillis also demonstrates that racial theism provided a powerful impetus for modernists to enter the American debate over race degeneracy. America, he maintained, was a religious ideal as much as it was a political, cultural, or biological entity. Hillis adapted racial theism for an era of increased immigration and rapid demographic shifts, attempting to turn it into a more racially inclusive concept that celebrated the spiritual superiority of native American stock while at the same time maintaining that this spiritual superiority could be propagated into an increasingly racially heterogeneous body politic.

Over the course of the first few decades of the twentieth century, modernists often sparred with mainline eugenicists over the sources of national identity and the proper bases of Christian civilization. Was national identity within the white racial body or was it without, in America's religious, political, and cultural traditions? Was the capacity for civilization an innate faculty restricted to certain racial stocks or could it be inculcated through religious ideals? Was race betterment simply a matter of better breeding or did it require a broader commitment to resolving the inequalities exacerbated by modern society? These were the questions that would come to dominate modernist ministers' engagements with eugenics in the teens and twenties. Hillis is somewhat exceptional in this regard, as many modernists sided with eugenicists in prioritizing the biological over the social, breeding over environmental initiatives. Many echoed eugenicists by insisting that true reform would only come with the better breed. "Put a pig in a parlor," one pro-eugenics minister opined in 1926, "he will make it a sty. Put low human types in the best social structure you can picture and in brief time crime, war, industrial disorder, poverty and disease will be the result. All reforms –of morality, of government, of the nation, of the

social order –await the bettering of the race.”⁶⁸ Such an argument obviously contrasts with Hillis’ own thesis that Anglo-American religious ideals could uplift people from without.

The differences that emerged between modernists with respect to the power of biology in shaping human nature developed as part of an unresolved problem within modernism itself. Modernism defined human nature as a spiritual-animal composite, but it left open the question as to which side of the hyphen should be prioritized. This openness made modernism amenable to very different attitudes about race. Those who, like the minister above, argued that race propagation was an inside-out process overwhelmingly maintained that inferior racial stocks were inherently incapable of civilization. They also tended to emphasize that such people were beyond the pale of Christian influence. The same minister cited above declared to his congregants, “Just as the heavy smoke of the many chimnies [*sic*] settles on the city making a black fog which blots out the stars so the bad blood of man’s blackened heredity looks like a shroud on the surface of society.” For this minister, true reform was an inside-out process. “No better world without first better people!” he shouted to his congregation.⁶⁹ The version of modernism that championed race propagation as an inside-out dynamic defined racial theism in explicitly biological terms. As another pro-eugenics minister declared to his congregation in 1926, “Our pedigree is not merely an ornament that is hung like a necklace about our throats, it is something that is burned into our bone and sinew and stamped upon the roots of our being, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, soul of our soul.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “1926 Contest,” *American Eugenics Society Papers*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Hillis, on the other hand, exemplifies those modernists who saw race propagation as an outward-in process. He prioritized social reforms and religious instruction as means to strengthening the spiritual faculties and uplifting human bodies. His brand of modernism was typically much more liberal when it came to racial attitudes precisely because it perceived national life as primarily a religious or cultural inheritance rather than a biological one. Race betterment was thus a more inclusive concept in so far as it described an uplifting process that transpired through social institutions and not through the enhancement of any one particular race over another. For Hillis, the concept of “race” as it applied to the issues of “race degeneracy” and “race betterment” more accurately referred to the *human* race and not the white race. This is not to say that Hillis eschewed views that would be considered racist by twenty first century Americans. He most certainly did not. Rather, it is to underscore the fact that, while he suggested native whites were superior, he located American identity within its religious ideals and not its blood.

CHAPTER 4: THE DIVINE PERSONALITY: SHAILER MATHEWS' EVOLUTIONARY THEISM

“There can be no no-God land between the opposing forces of naturalism and religion. Though we take the wings of the telescope and fly to the utmost reach of space, God must be there. Though we descend to the depths of atoms, there, too, He must sustain us. Though we trace the course of evolution and social transformation, there, too, must God be found. For He is nowhere if He is not there.”

-Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 1924

Introduction

On October 31, 1900, E.W. Hicks from Toulon, Illinois, wrote a letter to Shailer Mathews, Professor in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago and editor of the *Biblical World*. “How,” Hicks asked Mathews, “on the principles of natural development applied to the Mosaic religion in the Old Testament, are we to account for Jesus of Nazareth being an ethical finality? On what principle of natural development do we stop with Jesus?”¹ Hicks posed these inquiries to Mathews because Mathews was then emerging as an authority on the topic of evolution and Christianity. Indeed, Mathews was on his way to becoming one of the great systematizers of Protestant modernism in the country. Over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, Mathews developed arguably the most systematic theological position on the theory of evolution as it applied to Christianity. Mathews’ championed a faith that envisioned a co-partnership between Christianity and science in the conscientious production of a better human race and in so doing he encouraged a generation of Protestant ministers to see eugenics as an ally in doing God’s evolutionary work.

¹ Box 6, Folder 9, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

As part of this theology, Mathews argued that God worked through evolution in order to create a being who approached him in spiritual likeness. Mathews attempted to harmonize evolution and Christianity through his concept of “personality.” Jesus Christ represented the perfect personality evolved by God in mankind, a perfect moral and spiritual nature who revealed the promise of evolution itself: a humanity transfigured in the likeness of God. In his response to Hicks, Mathews admitted that accepting Jesus as the ethical finality of evolution represented an article of faith and not a tenet of science. Such was the main principle of the “faith of modernism” that Mathews developed over the course of his career. Through evolution, God was unfolding a spiritual nature in humankind, a nature that was both subject to and apart from the mechanics of the material order. While it defied physical laws of nature, Mathews insisted to Hicks, the reality of human freedom required that one accept the notion of personality as a matter of fact. In this way, Jesus represented Mathews’ abiding, and perhaps impossible, hope in evolution as an ethical and spiritual process.

Mathews’ concept of personality bears remarkable similarity to Horace Bushnell’s notion of sovereignty, yet the two theistic tenets are ultimately quite different. Both refer to the idea that human nature is simultaneously within and without the organismic processes of life, bearing a relationship to physiology that is at once immanent and transcendent, a *part of* and *apart from*, the material order of cause and effect. Hence, Mathews wrote in his reply to Hicks, “So long as there is any personality, so long must we hold that the chain of cause and effect has been superceded by freedom. The limits of this freedom it is perhaps hard to state precisely, but that it exists anyone must admit who admits personality at all.”² In other words, so long as one accepts free will, Mathews believed, one accepts the notion of personality.

² Ibid.

Unlike Bushnell's concept of sovereignty, however, personality did not denote racial superiority. Personality was not a principle of racial theism, but, one might say, *evolutionary* theism, since by it Mathews was not suggesting that some races were more transcendent with respect to material causality than others. As an evolutionary concept, personality was premised upon the idea of human animality. Humans had evolved like any other organism and human nature thus shared in animal life. Unlike animals, however, humans possessed personality, which referred to an immaterial or spiritual capacity to rise above the material chain of cause and effect and aspire to higher ideals revealed by God in Christ. Mathews believed that all racial stocks possessed personality, none more or less than others. This meant that all races were equally prone to animality and succumbing to a life dominated by animal impulses. Christianity was thus not the special providence of a particular "godly seed" as it was for Bushnell, but rather, a revelation for all humankind regarding God's evolutionary designs.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that not all modernists supported eugenics out of a commitment to racial theism. Eugenics received considerable support from modernists whose evolutionary commitments focused on the uplift of the human race and not on the protection of national identity through the enhancement of the white racial body. Mathews supported eugenic regulation of marriage as part of a theistic commitment to viewing redemption in evolutionary terms and not racial ones. For him, the eugenic control of reproductive relations represented a way of evolving a higher spiritual nature in humankind. He supported the prohibition of marriage among the morally degenerate. He also supported eugenics as a method for fostering higher ideals of parenthood. Yet Mathews eschewed racial thinking. In fact, he thought scientific racism was simply social prejudice projected onto human biology. The notion of white racial superiority was a habit of thought, he insisted, and not a scientific reality.

Mathews engaged eugenic thought and practice, therefore, not as a way of building or strengthening national life through the hereditary development of the white race but as a way of fighting against animality as a general human condition. For him, the fight against animality described a *human* struggle and not a racial one. Propagation denoted an outside-in process that uplifted the human race through the development of a higher spiritual nature, a humanity that would overcome its selfish animal impulses by aspiring to the spirit of cooperation and service that he believed was embodied by Christ. The evolutionary paradox of the human animal meant that biological interventions proposed by eugenicists were necessary. Animality imposed physical limitations on the development of the spiritual and this meant that some people were far too animalistic and thus beyond the pale of spiritual uplift. Mathews therefore endorsed eugenic initiatives as part of his evolutionary struggle to uplift the human animal.

Mathews understood eugenics as the application of hereditary knowledge to societal development. He did not think that eugenics was inherently racist, although he was certainly well aware of the fact that Americans supported eugenic initiatives out of racial prejudice. As simply the study and social application of hereditary knowledge, Mathews saw eugenics as a useful tool for Christianity in its evolutionary struggle against degeneracy. Staunchly opposing race nationalism and other dispositions of the personality that he would have seen as outmoded and regressive, Mathews rejected eugenics as both a practice of race hygiene and an ideology of racial theism. His belief that the social application of hereditary knowledge could benefit the creation of a Christian society, therefore, speaks to the fact that eugenics was adaptable to a number of modernist visions, some of which were explicitly anti-racist in orientation. His insistence that animality imposed material restraints on the development of personhood meant that modernists who stood against racial prejudice saw eugenics as potent tool or method for

eliminating impediments to a Christian society. Through his work, Mathews endorsed the eugenic restriction of marriage as part of his theistic commitments and helped to promote the sterilization of the unfit as a social exigency. Since negative eugenic measures like sterilization targeted poor whites in the early part of the twentieth century, Mathews had good reason to understand his support for marriage restriction and sterilization as part of a broader struggle against degeneracy and not as being racially motivated.

A Religion of Life

“The simple fact is that the center interest in religion is passing from theology to life,” Mathews declared in his most sustained and comprehensive statement of the central ideas involved in modernist Christianity.³ If there was an organizing tenet of Mathews’ faith it was that Christianity had to become a life-ordering force. In his 1924 treatise, *The Faith of Modernism*, Mathews made this a mantra. Modernism, he wrote, “is not aiming at a system of theology but at organizing life on a Christian basis.”⁴ Mathews argued that the notion that the purpose of religion was to sustain and improve human life was not a new idea. Christianity “always has been a way of ordering life and its institutions.”⁵ Modernism simply made explicit what had always been a central, albeit implicit part of Christianity. Mathews’ understood that this new emphasis for Christian faith had consequences, however. Most notably, it meant that any reflection about God or religion had to begin with life itself and work inductively to speculate about God’s purposes. Since Christianity was, first and foremost, “a community of life, not a system of philosophy or

³ Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1924), 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

theology,”⁶ it ought to be assessed primarily in terms of how well it ordered life and only secondarily in terms of how well it understood God. The premise was simple: God wanted human life to thrive and reach ever upward toward a more perfect form of social organization. To know how to make life thrive was, therefore, to know God and his purposes.

Mathews subscribed to two overlapping tenets that dominated the scientific study of religion during his day. First, he believed that religion was a natural phenomenon. Religions emerged organically to answer human needs, developing specifically as a way for human groups to make sense of their environments and to exert some degree of control over them. Religions, one might say, emerged at the intersection of a group and its environment, embedded within the immanent forces of life and offering cognitive (i.e., anthropomorphizing) tools and ritualistic methods for humans in their struggle to reconcile themselves with forces greater than they. “A religion,” Mathews wrote in a 1924 publication, “may be described as the complex of those social acts by means of which a group undertakes to ward off the anger and gain the help of those superhuman and not understood elements of its surroundings upon which it depends.” For Mathews, this meant that religion sprung from feelings of “helplessness” and “dependence.” Ritualized over time, Mathews wrote, “Religious practices of the whole group are the product of a desire of the members of that group for self-protection and advantage.”⁷ Any given religion, therefore, represented a “social inheritance” that allowed a group to succeed in a given environment.⁸ While one might assume that a Christian theologian would find such a functionalist view of religion trivializing, Mathews embraced naturalism as a framework for

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Shailer Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion* (D. Appleton and Co., 1924), 3.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

understanding the importance of religion. Religion testified to the audacity and triumph of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds. But it also denoted order and purpose in the universe. Religion was thus not trivialized for being natural. On the contrary, Mathews imagined it ennobled.

If religion was natural, for Mathews, it was also evolutionary. Religion evolved from lower to higher forms, developing hand-in-hand with the social organization of human groups. As societies grew more complex, so did their religions, with socio-political life and religious life mirroring one another. Thus, the social complexity of any given human group corresponded with the complexity of its religious practice, and vice versa. Christianity was the most evolved religion in Mathews mind, allowing for a social organization of unparalleled complexity.

Mathews theorized that there were four stages in the evolution of religion. First, there was the “primitive” stage in which loosely organized bands of early humans attempted to directly influence their environments through religious and magical rites. In this stage, “man found himself face-to-face with the awfulness of Nature,” and developed rites that would make nature and “the heavens propitious.”⁹ After primitive religions, Mathews argued, came tribal religions, which denote the more complex social organization of tribal life. In this stage, natural forces are personified as deities and the relationship between humans and superhuman forces are understood in personal terms.¹⁰ This stage typically saw the elevation of a “chieftain” god over the others and revolved around the development of practices that allowed worshippers to gainfully influence their personal relationship with this chief deity (e.g., animal and even human

⁹ Ibid., 358.

¹⁰ Ibid., 360.

sacrifice).¹¹ The next stage of religion Mathews described as monarchical, reflecting the more complex socio-political organization of feudal life. In this stage, religious thought and practice supported the socio-political ideal of hierarchy by electing one god to universal authority. Monarchical religion thus corresponded with the evolutionary advent of monotheistic traditions and their characteristic emphasis on moral behavior: one god becomes “king of creation” and a universal “standard of morality.”¹² Religions in this stage were theological in orientation and often dogmatic with respect to defining the godhead. Mathews maintained that the world’s great religious traditions occupied this stage,¹³ but he clearly believed Christianity represented its most refined iteration.

Mathews discerned an incipient stage in the evolution of religion, one he detected in the increasing complexity of modern life and one that corresponded with the development of Protestant Christianity. Mathews believed that evangelical Protestantism facilitated the emergence of modern socio-political systems in the United States, which Mathews identified with the political form of democracy and the economic form of industrialization. Mathews’ work implied that evangelical Protestantism facilitated such by introducing new socio-political ideals of individual freedom and equality, which were effectively leveling the older ideal of hierarchy that dominated monarchical society. As he wrote in *The Faith of Modernism*, “For the first time in history there are being formed a morality and a social order where no man is recognized as having inherited right to claim authority.”¹⁴ And yet Mathews thought that Protestantism was

¹¹ Ibid., 361.

¹² Ibid, 364-65.

¹³ Ibid., 365-66.

¹⁴ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 8-9.

failing to see the evolutionary leap that it was inaugurating through. It anxiously clung to the monarchical stage, which championed theology, dogmatism, and church authority. Indeed, this was the nucleus of Mathews' critique of Fundamentalism: it looked backwards for answers to socio-political shifts that were taking humans *past* the hierarchical stage of religion, shifts that Protestantism itself had initiated. As Mathews saw it, what was needed was neither greater theological clarity nor renewed commitment to doctrinal or scriptural inerrancy. What was exigent instead was a return to the natural purpose of religion, which was to successfully adapt humans to their environment. Mathews believed that evangelical Christianity was, from both an evolutionary *and* a religious viewpoint, uniquely suited to adapt humanity to the complexity of modern life. Indeed, Mathews' work represents the most systematic attempt to rethink and retool evangelical Christianity as a force that would allow humans to flourish in modern conditions.

If religions had evolved, so too did humans. Evolution supplied Mathews not only with a framework for reconceiving religion as a force that allowed humans to adapt to increasingly complex forms of socio-political life but also with a paradigm for reimagining human nature. Mathews believed humans were organisms subject to biological laws of heredity. In *The Faith of Modernism*, Mathews wrote,

We are increasingly coming to see that the individual can be best understood by searching his history. Ancestors are keys to an understanding of disease and genius alike. We know that any individual life cannot be separated from its ancestry and social environment and is, therefore, not wholly responsible for its bent and characteristics. This fact gives rise to a new sense of the complexity of any attempt to induce people to be good.¹⁵

Mathews understood evolution as an interaction between environment and biology, and here he was admitting that the biological forces of heredity predisposed individuals to certain kinds of behaviors that complicated religious inducements to be good. If the aim of religion was to adapt

¹⁵ Ibid., 94-95.

human organisms to their environment, Mathews' argument went, then it had to take into consideration the hereditary "bent" of human nature that subtended environmental conditions by supplying a comportment or bearing to individual life.

Mathews conceived human evolution in both teleological and moralistic terms: the evolution of human socio-political life described an upward process whereby human nature was being slowly transformed from an animalistic to a more ennobled form. And this was precisely the "complexity" that heredity introduced with respect to the evolutionary work of religion. Bad heredity produced devolved natures that slowed the evolutionary process: "What is more, we are finding that inheritances have a backward pull. As it is easier to follow the instinct and passions which make our inheritance from our animal and social past than to go on from them to more personal ideals and cooperation with others."¹⁶

Mathews understood the human being as a composite of "impersonal" and "personal" forces, which underscores the fact that, while he believed biological inheritance important, his comprehension of evolution was *not* biologically reductionistic. Impersonal forces included the chemical, biological, or physical energies that organized the material dimensions of life. Personal forces referred to extra- or super-material energies that organized the inter-subjective relations between humans and their environments. Heredity was an impersonal force that influenced human nature, while love and compassion were personal forces.

For Mathews, impersonal and personal forces both shaped what he called "personality," an abstract and encompassing concept that referred to moral discernment and aspiration, among other things. "We cannot detach a personality from its inheritances," Mathews wrote in a passage in which he insisted that heredity shaped human nature, "and goodness must therefore always be

¹⁶ Ibid.

relative. If we are to convert a person we have to convert an entire ancestry which he epitomizes in himself, as well as the influences of his social environment.”¹⁷ Importantly, however, heredity was not beyond the uplifting, personal influence of religion: it “is possible for an individual,” Mathews averred, “to be freed from the domination of his lower inheritances.” Such an assertion demonstrates two important things about Mathews’ modernist faith. First, Mathews imagined the relationship between impersonal and personal forces in evolutionary terms, with the former associated with the lower order of animality and the latter with the higher being of human life. Second, human nature was an open and malleable thing. Indeed, the function of religion as a life-organizing force was to shape it into a nobler form. As Mathews tersely put it, “Human nature can be regenerated.”¹⁸

Mathews’ Critique of Scientific Materialism

Through his writings and public lectures during the teens and twenties, Mathews launched one of the most sustained, informed, and reputable critiques of scientific materialism in the country up to that time. Mathews was, perhaps, better read than any other modernist leader in the science and philosophy of evolution. His comprehensive knowledge of evolutionary theory made him a respectable figure in both religious and scientific circles. He was best known for developing a view of evolution that, in contradistinction to the naturalism of his day, refused to reduce evolution to material processes. In this respect, he represented a large and influential contingency of earnest Protestants who saw evolution as a model for reinterpreting the work of Christianity and yet who perceived scientific materialism not merely as a threat to religion but as a danger to the human spirit itself. Thus, Mathews defined modernism as a halfway position

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 162.

between the materialism of modern science and the supernaturalism of traditional religion. Unlike Fundamentalists, who, as Mathews insisted, clung to a supernatural/interventionist view of divine activity, modernism championed evolution as a framework for reconceiving God's redemptive work in naturalistic terms. Unlike many naturalists, however, modernists like Mathews refused to "minimize the human activities we call personal" by reducing "all knowledge to sensation."¹⁹ Indeed, Mathews could be just as condemning of naturalists as Fundamentalists. In insisting that "there is no form of existence other than those envisaged by physics and chemistry," Mathews maintained, many modern naturalists fail to see that "life is more than any of its elements."²⁰

Mathews' critique of scientific materialism revolved around his concept of personality, which introduced an ontological disjunction within evolution as a continuous development. In Mathews' mind, humans were both evolutionarily continuous with lower forms of life and ontologically distinct from everything that had come before. In a public lecture entitled, "The Higher Materialism," Mathews explained, "Somewhere in the long chain of experience which binds us as human beings with the animals, there has emerged the integrated, self-energized, new quality, but imponderable, -a plus quality that is unsusceptible to analysis. The plus quality [...] we call 'person' and 'personality', the outstanding qualities of which belong to humanity itself." Personality distinguished human existence –which was "reflective and purposeful" –from the lower organisms. In an illustrative passage, Mathews brought this line of thinking to a conclusion: "We may freely admit that human life is rooted in its physical side in the soil of animal inheritances, but in its really characteristic aspects it lifts its head and lives with self-

¹⁹ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

directive powers in the upper world of a spiritual order.”²¹ In insisting as much, Mathews was articulating an understanding of human evolution that dominated modernist circles since Beecher. Humans were ontologically liminal: half animal and half divine and hence strung between an animal past and spiritual future. While they shared their physical life with animals, they also possessed a higher, spiritual, *personal* life that was irreducible to their impersonal pre-history.

One might be tempted to ask how Mathews imagined the impersonal and personal forces to connect within the human being. After all, he clearly saw these forces as interacting, especially within the moral decisions that humans made. Mathews thought that personal forces were folded into human nature during an individual’s development and that these forces counteracted baser impulses that were transmitted as part of humanity’s animal inheritances.²² But to inquire as to how, precisely, the personal and impersonal connected within the human being would be to invoke materialist presuppositions, which Mathews consciously sought to challenge in his own work. Mathews was quite content to accept the idea that there was something *more* to humans than biology and chemistry as a matter of faith. And while Mathews knew that many naturalists would have found such a tenet of faith unsatisfying, he was also aware that his concept of personality had its merits. Personality, Mathews would have insisted, could account for the human spirit, which was always greater than the limits imposed by human physicality. As Mathews wrote, “We do not hesitate to say that the process of chemistry is impersonal, and that the mental, volitional, and intellectual life of the chemist is personal.”²³ His

²¹ Box 2, Folder 2, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

²² Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 411.

²³ *Ibid.*, 397-98.

point was that, as evidenced by the chemist's ambitions to understand and subdue nature, human aspiration outstripped its material constraints. It is the "mental, volitional, and intellectual life" of humans that "makes the mechanistic interpretation of life unsatisfactory," Mathews explained. "Men deliberately undertake to be different from what they are. They judge the present state in the light of something more or better which they may apprehend."²⁴

As a religion of life, the most important message preached by Mathews' modernism was that humanity was an unfinished creation. The human personality had yet to be completely and perfectly unfolded. It would continue to evolve until the advent of that perfect socio-political order envisioned by Mathews and other modernists, the Kingdom of God on earth. While the eschatology of the Kingdom referred to a terrestrial event in so far as evolution constituted an earthly process, the modernist concept of the Kingdom did not denote a definite point in time. Like evolution, the Kingdom referred to the long and slow process through which the fullness of the human personality approached the divine. As the human personality slowly unfolded, so too would a more perfect socio-political order. The modernist concept of the kingdom was thus an event forever upon the evolutionary horizon of human nature, always approaching but never fully come. In this way, the Kingdom compelled Christians not to wait for a coming redemption but to actively participate with God in his creative endeavor. Human nature was, after all, an unfinished work.

If the Kingdom described a long-term commitment to uplifting human nature, modernism had an immediate goal. The immediate task of modernism was to adjust the human personality to the conditions of modern life, which principally involved cultivating a cooperative spirit of sacrifice and service. Modernism often functioned as a moral critique of modern American

²⁴ Ibid., 398.

culture, especially the outdated and hurtful values that modernists believed lay at the root of modern problems. Mathews himself often spoke out against the narrow-mindedness of nationalism and “racial prejudice,” which were rooted in sentiments once socially valuable in that they fostered group pride and preservation but which were unhelpful and even retrogressive during a time of increasing proximity between different human groups. Modernists like Mathews saw the First World War as stark evidence that these forms of prejudice could do nothing to advance a society that was increasingly global. Mathews also identified other seemingly intractable modern social problems, especially those related to urbanization and industrialization, like greed, intemperance, and criminality. The root of these problems was a human personality ill adapted for the conditions of modern life. The key, Mathews insisted, was to develop religious ideas and practices that could reconcile humans to this new environment and allow them to thrive. These ideas and practices should promote ideals like love, cooperation, service, mutual uplift, and universal brotherhood. Mathews insisted that Christianity –a religion that revolved around the compassionate figure of Christ –was uniquely disposed to shape the human personality according to these ideals.

An Unfinished Creation: Mathews’ Engagements with Eugenics

If one ignores their divergent views on race, Mathews was a direct intellectual heir of Horace Bushnell. Natural processes were divine methods. God worked through the development of life, with the religious vision of an increasingly perfect creation converging with naturalist conceptions of life as a developing continuum. As Mathews declared in *The Faith of Modernism*, “As one looks into the abysmal depths of the universe, God cannot be pictured as a sovereign in some distant heaven. As one knows more of the mystery of matter and traces the processes by which worlds are made and life evolves, He cannot be thought of as having once and for all

created the world and all that is therein.”²⁵ From Bushnell to Mathews, modernism had developed as a theological practice of imagining the natural world as an unfinished creation, which included a religious habit of viewing redemption in terms of the propagation of a more god-like humanity.

Clergymen and teachers from across the country recognized Mathews as an authoritative voice on the subject of religion and evolution. As Dean of Divinity School at the University of Chicago, Mathews responded to anyone who wrote to him seeking his advice on the topic of evolution. James Essex, a high school teacher from Camden, Missouri wrote to Mathews in 1922. A self-described a “champion” of evolutionism, Essex felt isolated by his fellow faculty members, who were “opposed to the theory of evolution,” undoubtedly on religious grounds. Essex wanted his students “to take the affirmative in the debate” over evolution and solicited Mathews’ advice in teaching his students to look past the facile and overwrought rhetoric that cast religion and evolution as opposing forces. Essex regarded Mathews for the openness with which he treated the controversial topic and for his commitment to reconciling religious and scientific worldviews. Mathews responded in his characteristic way –namely, by distinguishing between the “facts” of evolution, on the one hand, and the materialist philosophy endorsed by many modern naturalists, on the other. To “deny spiritual value to humanity or to deny the existence of God as argued by such elements of the cosmic process,” Mathews averred, simply represented the “partisanship” of the materialist philosophy. For Mathews, evolution was simply a set of facts regarding human origin and development and thus irreducible to the materialist position. He encouraged Essex to see evolution in such a way. In so doing, he inspired

²⁵ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 107.

confidence in the schoolteacher, encouraging him to recognize that evolution was compatible with Christian perspectives on human embodiment and divine purpose.²⁶

In addition to this professional correspondence, Mathews helped to disseminate evolutionism in other important ways. During the early 1920s, he reviewed manuscripts for Macmillan Publishing Company in New York, either recommending or not recommending the books that he read for publication. As a publisher of religious books, Macmillan was especially interested in works on Christianity and modern science. Given Mathews' authority on the topic, his reviews served an important role in Macmillan's decisions regarding publication. Mathews recommended manuscripts that he believed would do the most to help elucidate his modernist cause to the American reading public.

Mathews was especially sympathetic towards manuscripts that would help Americans differentiate the modernist from the materialist position with respect to human evolution. In his reviews, he characteristically invoked criteria that stressed rigorous treatment from both a religious *and* scientific perspective since, for Mathews, any fair treatment of evolution had to adequately consider the specific claims made by religious knowledge with respect to the value of human life. For example, in a review of a manuscript entitled, *Evolution of Man*, Mathews recommended publication while criticizing the author for describing the mind as a "function of living matter," a reduction that Mathews believed conceded too much to the materialist position. Ultimately, however, Mathews deemed the work's position on religion "satisfactory," while describing its consideration of the "scientific approach" as "exceedingly well posted."²⁷ In a review of a more religious treatment of evolution entitled, *Human Nature and Evolution*,

²⁶ Box 16, Folder 4, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

²⁷ Box 37, Folder 1, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

Mathews discouraged publication because the manuscript represented a “rather amorphous handling of scientific problems.”²⁸ In a review for yet another religious treatment, entitled, *A New Theory of Human Evolution*, Mathews reached the same verdict. While he liked the author’s evolutionary concept of “involution,” which referred to a spiritual process through which the “animals” in man were made “to lie down,” Mathews concluded that the manuscript was not sufficiently rigorous with respect to the scientific facts of evolution.²⁹

Encouraging clergymen and other professionals to reconcile Christian religiosity with an evolutionary perspective, however, also meant recommending eugenics. Responding to a letter from Walter Feser from Bible School Park, New York, Mathews suggested Horatio Newman’s encompassing volume, *Evolution, Genetics, and Eugenics*, and Edwin Conklin’s *The Direction of Human Evolution*.³⁰ Mathews typically recommended the works of scientists and other professionals who supported the application of evolutionary principles to social planning and governance but who remained critical of the materialist vision of evolution espoused by mainline eugenicists. He often promoted the works of scientific professionals who consciously sought to give Christianity a prominent place within eugenics.

H.H. McNeill, for example, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Marianna, Florida, wrote to Mathews on October 16, 1920. “Will you please advise me,” McNeill queried, “if your Divinity School considers, and so teaches, the faith in Jesus the Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of men is consistent with the facts of the universe?” Mathews responded in the affirmative, suggesting that McNeill read Henry Fairfield Osborn’s 1916 *The Origin and*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Box 16, Folder 3, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

Evolution of Life, a work that Mathews characterized as the “best presentation of the facts of evolution.”³¹ Osborn, a famous American paleontologist and president of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, collaborated with mainline eugenicists like Davenport in organizing the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1921.³² A proponent of eugenics, however, Osborn was suspicious of scientific materialism, while he published books that encouraged Americans to see evolution as reconcilable with Christian principles. He dedicated one of his volumes, *Evolution and Religion in Education*, to John Thomas Scopes and “other courageous teachers of the United States,” who “taught the truth of evolution and the fact that this great law of living nature is consistent with the highest ideals of religion and conduct.”³³

Mathews held works on eugenics to the same standards that he held works on evolution. This is especially clear in a manuscript review that Mathews wrote for H.H. Horne’s *Christ in Man Making*. Horne was professor of the philosophy of education at New York University, a man whose religious identity and professional commitments as an educator allowed him to see eugenics as method ordained “by the Creator in bringing mankind into his image.” In the introduction to his work, Horne iterated the central tenets of modernism by insisting that “man is not yet fully made; that each new generation is a step forward in the process, that personal and social life are unfinished, that the world of life is not a spent force, that growth is still going on, that God as the creative principle of existence is still active.”³⁴ In a statement that could have

³¹ Box 16, Folder 2, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

³² Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 133. “Osborn, Henry F.” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³³ Henry Fairfield Osborn, *Evolution and Religion in Education* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), vii.

been made by Mathews himself, Horne declared, “The natural man is becoming spiritual. The human race is being made, developed, and redeemed.”³⁵ Horne’s declaration illustrates how influential modernism had become. For Horne, eugenics provided an opportunity for Christians to “show our need of Christ in race-building.”³⁶ In his review of the manuscript that Horne submitted to Macmillan, Mathews sympathized with Horne’s project, deeming it a “very valuable service” in so far as it would introduce its readership to a Christian view of eugenics.³⁷

Mathews, however, ultimately recommended that Macmillan not publish Horne’s volume on the grounds that its treatment of Christianity and eugenics was “superficial as a whole.” Mathews was evidently aware of Horne’s professional achievements and intellectual capabilities as an educator, as he described the volume as an underachievement for the author. Mathews thought the volume superficial because Horne defended eugenics by quoting scripture instead of advancing a Christian perspective of eugenics from a more philosophical position, as Mathews thought he should have. Thus, while Mathews agreed with Horne’s argument that the “man making” envisioned by eugenics could and should be Christian in scope and practice, he found Horne’s treatment to be insufficiently rigorous.³⁸ It is worth noting that the book was ultimately published not by Macmillan, but by the Methodist publishing affiliate, Abingdon Press.

Mathews helped to disseminate eugenic thought and practice in his own publications. In *The Faith of Modernism*, Mathews maintained that Christians should support a more restrictive

³⁴ Herman Harrell Horne, *Christ in Man-Making* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1926), 15.

³⁵ Ibid., 17.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.

³⁷ Box 37, Folder 1 Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

³⁸ Ibid.

view of marriage by endeavoring to keep those who were overly animalistic from having children. Mathews believed that family life represented the most important vector with respect to the intergenerational transmission of degeneracy. His reputation as a respected theologian suggests that many like him viewed eugenic restrictions on marriage as Christian practices, which helps to explain why negative eugenic initiatives were successfully enacted as social policies in the United States. Modernism contributed to the socialization of eugenics by translating eugenic ideas and initiatives into a Christian idiom that associated evolutionary fitness with godliness and unfitness with animality. In fact, in differentiating between the personal and the impersonal, the immaterial and the material, or the god-like and the animal, modernism provided the circuitry for eugenics as a discourse of embodiment to circulate within white Christian communities. Through his evolutionary theism, Mathews encouraged a generation of Americans to associate sinfulness with devolution and middle class Christian ideals with evolutionary fitness, especially cooperation, service, and civility. In this way, his modernism provided a framework for Americans to rationalize their support for negative eugenics through a Christian discourse of embodiment.

And yet, in so far as it saw the human race as an unfinished creation strung between a Christ-like future and an animal past, Mathews' version of modernism would have also provided Americans with important resources for *challenging* the materialist claims made by mainline eugenicists. Mathews *Contributions of Science to Religion*, for example, was published as a sourcebook for those who wanted to view evolution, eugenics, and other scientific topics from a theistic perspective. In fact, Mathews intended the volume as a "general textbook for science in Christian colleges."³⁹ The volume included chapters authored by thirteen scientific professionals

³⁹ Box 40, Folder 1, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

on topics related to their fields, including a chapter on eugenics written by Charles Davenport, who represented the materialist perspective on to the topic of race betterment. An important takeaway from the book was that the betterment of the human race could and should be a Christian enterprise, one that was dedicated to unfolding the personal powers of humanity and, thereby, to carrying on the evolutionary work initiated by God. Christians should feel empowered to engage scientific programs like eugenics, Mathews suggested, because science itself was simply the record of God calling humanity to help him in his creative work. “One cannot read even superficially the history of science” Mathews wrote, “without seeing the continuous disclosure of this better understanding of a universe composed of that which is ever becoming.”⁴⁰

For Mathews, there was just as much controversy in disseminating eugenic ideas and practice as there was in promoting evolution. So long as it prioritized the human race’s spiritual development by emphasizing the immaterial aspects of the person, Mathews believed that eugenics constituted a vital part of the modernist program. As a religion of life, modernism represented the Christian application of evolution to human society, which meant that modernism offered a way of *living* evolution, that is, a way of working *with* evolution in order to make human life approximate the divine personality. So long as one held a Christian view of evolution, Mathews’ work and correspondence maintained, eugenic ideas, practices, and policies served to make society better. This helps to explain why Mathews openly engaged and promoted eugenic ideas and practices through his professional labors. But it also helps to explain how modernism, while helping to disseminate eugenic knowledge, often functioned as a critique of eugenics, especially its overly materialistic iterations.

⁴⁰ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 395.

Mathews on Eugenics and Race

An important part of Mathews' critique of materialism included materialists' arguments regarding racial differences. Mainline eugenicists, for example, argued that there were substantive genetic inequalities between races that manifested phenotypically through different physical, mental, and moral traits. These differences made races suited to different social positions, justifying the dominance of some races over others. Mainline eugenicists also argued that race mixing, especially miscegenation between blacks and whites, produced offspring of unbalanced nature. Such racial theories supported mainline eugenics as a program of white racial hygiene. Mathews, however, adamantly rejected scientific theories of race, arguing that, unlike mainline eugenicists, "real biologists deny the existence of any such biological fact." Scientific racism was simply "racial prejudice" masquerading as science. In truth, there was no biological reality to race and racial prejudice was itself a survival of social evolution that Mathews associated with a "tribal" or "primitive" mindset. This mindset, a holdout of an earlier stage of human personality, saw the "stranger" as "a wolf" and simply confused "social divisions with physical divisions." Racial prejudice, in short, mistook political hostilities for biological differences.⁴¹

Mainline eugenics was premised upon the notion of white superiority. It sought to preserve and protect white socio-political power and in so doing it stoked antipathies between racial groups. For these reasons, mainline eugenics was, for Mathews, both unscientific and unchristian. Mathews dismissed the mainline eugenic precept that there were qualitative differences between races with respect to their natures and the notion that miscegenation produced unbalanced offspring. Mathews, however, dismissed the idea that "children born of

⁴¹ Box 2, Folder 2 Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

marriages or irregular relations between members of different races” were biologically unbalanced and, in so doing, he rejected scientific precepts and social policies endorsed by mainline eugenics. Additionally, he argued that mainline eugenicists’ assumptions regarding the biological bases of race were unchristian. In an essay entitled, “On Racial Prejudice,” Mathews wrote, “To the Christian with the belief that God has made of one blood all nations of the earth such a position is untenable. In Christ there are no racial distinctions any more than there are racial distinctions in human cells.”⁴²

It is important to see Mathews’ views on racial prejudice as a part of his critique of materialism because these views were an intrinsic part of his theory of evolution, which was social and which prioritized personality over biology. For Mathews, if there were differences of mental, physical, and moral comportment between and within races, these differences were not rooted in biology but in socio-economic stratification, political hostilities, and devolved personalities. This meant that racial antipathies were simply “creatures of history.” Thus, in his critique of the racial prejudice fomented by whites against African Americans, Mathews argued that such racial prejudice represented “the confusion of biological with social situations.” Observing a “sense of inferiority of the negro” that was “common among the Anglican people,” Mathews insisted that this “sense” was rooted not in biological fact but in the social conditions produced by slavery and in a more general refusal to accept blacks “into the social organism.” In viewing blacks as inferior, Mathews argued, whites were simply projecting social inequality onto biology: “It is far from definite facts to describe the conditions of the negro in the United States as one of social equality as it is to find the basis of an actual social inequality in biology.”⁴³

⁴² Box 2, Folder 2 Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

⁴³ Ibid.

Biology was always a superficial and shallow medium for understanding the perpetuation of human differences for Mathews. The personality was the true vector for understanding differences between human groups and the antagonisms and ideologies to which these differences gave rise.

Mathews would have assumed that *all* races suffered from animality. Animality was a real condition that described humanity in its entirety and not any one race more than others. He also would have assumed that the transfiguration of animality principally described a social process and not a biological one. Drawing upon Lamarckism, Mathews argued that biology – which denoted the innate and instinctual – could be uplifted through social interventions. Hence, while degeneracy persisted through biological forces, the *real* sources of degeneracy were always social. Degeneracy referred to a condition of the personality, which if left to wallow in impoverished conditions, would lack the power to rise above animal propensities. If the personality were nurtured by wholesome Christian principles, however, it would acquire the power to rise *above* animality. In this way, Mathews imagined Christianity as leading humankind in an evolutionary struggle against the impersonal forces of organismic life. This religious understanding of evolution had two consequences with respect to the question of eugenics. First, it essentially nullified the importance of race as a eugenic category. Second, it located eugenics within a larger cooperative Christian endeavor to unite all races in the common labor of bringing God's kingdom to earth.

Mathews' critique of racial prejudice allows us to differentiate his views on eugenics from those who supported eugenics out of a commitment to racial theism. Racial theism tended to privilege biology over environment, as racial theism itself was premised upon the hereditary superiority of whites, especially old stock Americans. Its vision of eugenics promised to

strengthen national life by preserving and enhancing the white racial body. Those who supported eugenics out of a commitment to racial theism, therefore, were likely to view eugenics as a practice of race hygiene, with negative eugenic initiatives like immigration restriction, anti-miscegenation laws, and the sterilization of the unfit viewed as a means of protecting the “natural” superiority of whites and of thereby preserving the moral order of American society. Yet Mathews rejected racial theism and the eugenic ideas and policies it supported. In this way, his advocacy of eugenics demonstrates that eugenics was amenable to modernist platforms that eschewed the presumptions of racial prejudice. Mathews, who endorsed the eugenic regulation of marriage, especially the restriction of reproductive relations among the degenerate classes, did so not as part of an effort to preserve white racial power but as part of a broader struggle against human animality.

Certain eugenic measures were always racially charged. Immigration restriction and anti-miscegenation laws, for example, would have been difficult for Protestant leaders to support apart from the more materialist discourse of racial theism. This was because so much of the rhetoric of health that supported these initiatives was steeped in the logic of white racial hygiene. These initiatives were defended as part of a broader initiative to protect the white racial body from deleterious heredities. But Mathews’ modernist commitments help to demonstrate that, for Americans at the time, there was nothing intrinsically racist about positive eugenic measures that encouraged people to find fit marriage partners and to have more and better children for the sake of societal posterity. His modernism also suggests that there was nothing intrinsically racist about negative eugenic measures that sought to keep the unfit from reproductive relations. While Mathews’ support for eugenics was not racially motivated, however, it *was* classist. Those who, like him, endorsed eugenic sterilization laws, for example, were overwhelmingly middle class

whites who felt scandalized by the wanton reproductivity of the poor and who wanted marriage and family to be regulated by middle class norms and ideals.

Simply put, Mathews supported the eugenic regulation of marriage out of hereditarianism and not racism. While Mathews would have denied mainline eugenicists' claim that hereditary advancement could proceed solely through the material production of germ plasm, he nonetheless maintained that heredity imposed physical constraints on the development of personality. He endorsed eugenic initiatives out of a concern for improving heredity and the in-born compartments of future generations. He thought it was societally beneficial for fit people to choose fit marriage partners in order to propagate fitter children. He also believed that society would be improved by limiting reproduction among those who were sure to propagate their degeneracy into their children. He had little use, however, for eugenic initiatives that sowed racial antipathy and that were premised upon the false principles of scientific racism.

It is worth noting that Mathews' belief that the eugenic regulation of reproductive sex did not foment racial antipathy is supported by the enforcement of sterilization laws in the country, which primarily targeted poor whites during the early twentieth century. As the history of sterilization in North Carolina attests, sterilizations of poor African Americans (especially poor African American women) did not come to predominate until about mid-century, when sterilization became an important part of North Carolina social welfare policy.⁴⁴ Before World War II, however, sterilization policies principally targeted the hereditarian issue of white degeneracy. Therefore, and as I discuss at greater length in the following sections, Mathews' support for sterilization –and for the eugenic regulation of reproductive sex more broadly –

⁴⁴ Kevin Begos, et al. *Against Their Will: North Carolina's Sterilization Program and the Campaign for Reparations* (Apalachicola, FL: Gray Oak Books, 2012).

should be read as part of a commitment to viewing human sinfulness in the classist terms of hereditarianism and not racial ones.

Sin, Animality, and Redemption

In *The Faith of Modernism*, Mathews categorized modernists as “a class of evangelical Christians. That is, they accept Jesus Christ as the revelation of a Savior God.”⁴⁵ Mathews distinguished modernism from liberalism, which tends “toward the emphasis of intellectual belief and the criticism and repudiation of doctrines per se.”⁴⁶ Mathews also distinguished modernism from Fundamentalism (or what he referred to as “Confessionalism”): modernists are “evangelical Christians who use modern methods to meet modern needs. Confessionalism is the evangelicalism of the dogmatic mind. Modernism is the evangelicalism of the scientific mind.”⁴⁷ But how, one might reasonably ask, did modernism constitute a form of evangelical Christianity when modernists made evolutionary theory an intrinsic part of their understanding of redemption? For Mathews, the answer had to do with modernism’s evolutionary adaptation of the evangelical message of salvation through *personal* experience of Christ. To understand how modernism adapted such a message, however, we must first comprehend the modernist concept of sin and its relation to God’s evolutionary plan for humanity.

Mathews described sinfulness as an evolutionary condition. As such, the origins of sinfulness were simultaneously social and biological, with sinfulness having immediate implications for the development of both the individual and the evolution of society. On the one hand, sin circulated through social currents, stunting the development of human personalities. On

⁴⁵ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 34.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 36.

the other, sin passed through hereditary transmission as animalistic impulses. In both cases, sin was not conceived as a deontological matter. In other words, sin did not refer to disobedience to absolute moral law. Nor did it refer to a permanent human state rooted in a primordial act of disobedience. Rather, sin referred to the persistence of outmoded, unadapted, or unevolved dispositions and behaviors that survived despite their evolutionary obsolescence. The evolutionary condition of sinfulness kept humans from thriving in their environments by stunting the development of personality, with sinfulness more generally denoting “maladjustment to immanent purpose that brings suffering.”⁴⁸ Sinfulness was thus not simply a question of right and wrong; it referred to the “urge of life” itself,⁴⁹ marking a distortion or perversion in both the proper comportment of the individual and the bearing of human socio-political life.⁵⁰

In *Contributions of Science to Religion*, Mathews argued that biology supplied religion with a new framework for understanding sin. “Biology and the newly developed medical sciences give more realistic meaning to the conception of sin as the violation of the divine will.” The divine will, Mathews argued, was that “men shall grow less animal, less mechanistic, more personal, more regardful of others’ personality, more possessed of good-will.”⁵¹ While Mathews believed that the personality of any individual transcended his or her hereditary endowments, the individual’s personality nonetheless shared “a genetic relationship with animal instinct and behavior.”⁵² For Mathews, heredity represented the continuity between humankind and its

⁴⁸ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 413.

⁴⁹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 86.

⁵⁰ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 409.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 397.

animal past, with Mathews understanding human biology as a mechanistic substrate that denoted the common origins of –and the shared life between –humans and animals. Mathews thus associated heredity with animality, viewing it as a continuum through which animalistic behaviors were perpetuated in human society and a check on the development of the human personality. The biological sciences therefore had much to teach religion about the origins and perpetuation of sinfulness. While the biology of the body was not evil per se, its instinctiveness represented a moral challenge for the individual. The innate predispositions of the body could even adversely affect the propagation of a particular race. “By faulty matings,” Mathews bluntly averred, “a race may become degenerate.”⁵³ By “degenerate,” Mathews primarily meant proneness to animalistic –and hence *immoral* –behavior.

The relationship that Mathews’ imagined between heredity, animality, and sinfulness deserves a closer look. In *Contributions of Science to Religion*, Mathews wrote, “We inherit instincts, reflexes and mental habits from our animal forbears. Many of them are characteristics which we hold in common with the animals and the more primitive man.” In themselves, Mathews insisted, animal inheritances were “neither good nor bad.” Animal inheritances had their proper place and, so long as they were subordinate to higher ideals, these inheritances could be set to moral purposes. As Mathews explained, “When there is added to them an element of responsibility set by the demands of our own developing personality for going on to higher moral values, moral character attaches to their use.” But Mathews warned that animal inheritances could dominate the personality, resulting in degeneracy. “When these inheritances of the development through which humanity has passed become dominant and check the forward-looking personal elements, degeneration follows.” Allowing animal predispositions to dominate

⁵³ Ibid., 411.

the personality resulted not only in degeneracy, however. It also thwarted God's redemptive purposes by allowing suffering to proliferate: "When a man yields to the backward pull of outgrown goods he is running counter to the immanent law of the universe to progress. Suffering and loss are bound to ensue from such maladjustment and one aspect of the tragedy is that such maladjustment may bring suffering to others than its author."⁵⁴

But what did Mathews mean by animalistic propensities? Two examples will suffice here.

Mathews would have assumed that there was evolutionary value to human instincts like aggressiveness and competitiveness. These predispositions served humankind well in the primitive struggle to survive hostile environments and they no doubt led to human increase during times of severity. Mathews would have even maintained that aggressiveness and competitiveness continued to hold value for human society, especially as a way of engaging in "play and recreation."⁵⁵ He would have seen these evolutionarily useful instincts as having healthy outlets in modern life. The healthful channeling of aggressiveness and competition was especially important for the proper development of pre-adolescent boys, who, according to psychological theory at the time, capitulated a "savage" or "tribal" stage of racial evolution.⁵⁶ Modern outlets for these instincts included sports and other strenuous activities that productively channeled the negativity of these dispositions into the healthful development of young male bodies, while the development of bodies, Mathews assumed, was integral for the development of personality. Aggressiveness and competitiveness: these baser instincts –or these "outgrown

⁵⁴ Ibid., 411-12.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ William Byron Forbush, *The Coming Generation* (New York: Appleton and Co., 1912), 45.

goods” –simply needed to find an expression that served the development of a personality that had the strength and comportment to rise to the higher order of cooperation and service.

Mathews’ would have viewed human sexual desire in a similar way, although he certainly would not have described it as an “outgrown good.” Sex represented an animal instinct that allowed for the perpetuation of the species.⁵⁷ But, as an especially powerful instinct, sex also threatened health and social stability. In this way, sex was *both* good and bad. When sex was practiced through the monogamous, patriarchal institution of marriage, sex had a higher, even divine purpose. When sex was practiced outside the confines of marriage or when it was practiced in any way that abased its higher purpose, sex was unhealthful, perverted, or as Mathews would describe it, sinful. Mathews understanding of sinfulness thus rested upon an understanding of natural law in so far as the moral value of sex was determined by its “natural” reproductive function. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Mathews’ understanding of natural law supported his evolutionary concept of personality. To submit animal or primitive instincts to higher purposes was to act in accordance with the divine will, which promised the evolution of a higher nature within human life.

Mathews was suspicious of heredity. It represented the principal way in which animality persisted in modern society. And yet Mathews believed that animal instincts could be subordinated to nobler purposes through the strength of personality. In contradistinction to mainline eugenicists and other scientific professionals who he categorized as materialists, Mathews did not argue that the only way to social advancement was through better breeding, although he did admit that, in cases where the hereditary transmission of degeneracy was sure, society should prevent marriages between the unfit. Arguing that modernists needed to look to

⁵⁷ Box 2, Folder 1, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

biology for a better understanding of sinfulness and its perpetuation, Mathews wrote, we must “study the human condition of a family and endeavor to prevent the marriage of those whose children are certain to be subnormal and criminal.”⁵⁸ But, unlike materialists, Mathews averred that, except in extreme cases, human nature was responsive to the higher idealism of religion. In fact, Mathews went so far as to assert that the materialist view of human nature was inconsistent with Christianity. “Scientific interpretations of nature which deny all freedom of choice and reduce the intellectual life to chemical and physical activity are not consistent with religion, and religion is not consistent with them.”⁵⁹ By implication, this meant that eugenic approaches to human uplift that viewed human nature solely in terms of the play of physical forces were unchristian, as they refused to acknowledge the transcendent aspect of the person. Eugenic approaches were also unchristian if they denied the power of religion to transform human nature. Sinfulness, Mathews avowed, could be overcome through the inculcation of religious ideals, which strengthened the personality over and against animal impulses.

While he condemned materialism as unchristian, however, Mathews’ modernism concurred with mainline eugenics’ assumptions about human nature. His faith also shared mainline eugenicists’ presumptions about the purpose of evolution, which was to evolve the race into a more human, less animalistic embodiment. He even openly collaborated with mainline eugenicists in works that he published on modernism, viewing this collaboration as a necessary part of developing a confident theological position with respect to human evolution. In engaging mainline eugenicists, Mathews attempted to strengthen his own understanding of human nature and the evolutionary process through which, he hoped, it would be gradually perfected.

⁵⁸ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 97.

⁵⁹ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 10.

A prominent mainline eugenicist with whom Mathews collaborated was Charles Davenport, America's leading eugenicist during the 1910s and '20s and an exemplar of scientific materialism. Davenport wrote a chapter on eugenic science for Mathews' 1924 edited volume, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, a book in which Mathews devoted a great deal of energy to criticizing the materialist position. Mathews, who wrote the book's introduction and concluding chapters, fundamentally disagreed with Davenport's central claim that the whole of human nature had an instinctual basis. Davenport argued that human mental characteristics were transmitted in the same way as physical traits. Mental and physical characteristics were determined by chemical processes within the germ plasm, which referred to the protoplasmic material created by the union of gametes. Davenport thus insisted that the complexity of human mental life was reducible to chemical substances located in the germ plasm, a claim with which Mathews' objected on religious grounds. In fact, Davenport's science of the germ plasm allowed him to make all kinds of eugenic claims with which Mathews disagreed. In *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, Davenport wrote, "Man is an organism –an animal, and the laws of improvement of corn and race horses hold true for him also." Since human nature was reducible to the chemical substances of the germ plasm, Davenport averred, better humans could simply be bred, which represented an argument that left very little room for religion within the eugenic project of remaking human nature. And yet, in spite of their disagreements, Mathews and Davenport shared a basic assumption –namely, that evolution represented an upward struggle against human animality.

As already mentioned, Davenport believed that all human traits –including mental and physical characteristics –were produced by chemical processes initiated by the germ plasm in sexual reproduction. In this way, the germ plasm provided the biological medium through which

permanent race progress could be achieved. To make better humans, eugenicists argued, one simply needed to control the production of germ plasm by regulating sexual intercourse. If Davenport was idealistic about the possibility of breeding better people, however, he was deeply ambivalent about the human organism. This was because the germ plasm preserved and even perpetuated humanity's animal past. The germ plasm was at once the source of evolution and devolution. It was a medium of progress but it also threatened to plunge the human race back into primitivism. The germ plasm, it seems, was only partly human.

For example, in *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, Davenport wrote,

Just as certain adult persons show ancestral organs that most of us have lost –such as a heavy coat of hair, an elongated coccyx (tail), an unusually large appendix, a third set of teeth, –so some adult persons retain certain ancestral mental traits that the rest of us have got rid of. And just as the heavy coat of body hair can be traced back generation after generation until we cannot avoid the conclusion that [...] hairy people represent a human strain that has never gained the naked skin of most people, so imbecility and ‘criminalistic’ tendency can be traced back to the darkness of remote generations in a way that forces us to conclude that these traits have come directly to us from our animal ancestry and have never been gotten rid of.⁶⁰

As the passage suggests, an animal past haunted the germ plasm, a past that continued to reveal itself through the persistence of criminality, imbecility, and other forms of mental and moral degeneracy. Strung between a bright future of increasing mental, physical, and moral perfection and a dark primordial beginning, the human organism was ontologically liminal. The task of eugenics consisted in folding, grafting, or cultivating a higher nature into the germ plasm through better breeding. Ignoble characteristics and impulses would be bred out of the organism; noble ones would be bred into it. Of course, it is not that humanity would ever be divested of its organismic existence. In a very real sense, humans would always be animals. But the imagery Davenport mustered in warning Americans about the primordial “darkness” of the germ plasm

⁶⁰ Ibid., 263.

tells us that he was deeply anxious about the human organism's biological past, especially the animalistic propensities that allegedly lurked within the germ plasm. Defending eugenic policies like the eugenic segregation of the unfit, Davenport wrote, "Society must protect itself; as it claims the right to deprive the murderer of his life so also it may annihilate the *hideous serpent* of hopelessly vicious protoplasm."⁶¹ The point is that while materialists like Davenport championed the idea that humans were merely evolved organisms, mainline eugenics was always understood as an evolutionary struggle *against* the human animal.

In this way, the human animal represented an important point of convergence and divergence between mainline eugenic thought and practice, on the one hand, and theological modernism, on the other. For both, the human animal was an ontological problem in so far as it impeded evolutionary progress, although mainline eugenicists like Davenport and modernists like Mathews proposed very different ontologies for understanding the evolutionary redemption of humanity. For Davenport, the human animal was completely biological. Human nature would be uplifted through interventions within the material production of germ plasm. For Mathews, the human animal was at once biological *and* spiritual, with the ennobling of human nature entailing the development of non- or super-material faculties that Mathews identified with personality and that he believed would subordinate animal instincts to higher ends.

But even more consequential with respect to the divergence of modernism and eugenics was Mathews' insistence that human animality was responsive to the regenerative influence of religion. In contradistinction, Davenport believed that human animality could only be diminished by manipulating the production of germ plasm, which described a strictly material process of regulating the passage of hereditary traits from one generation to the next. As I discuss in the

⁶¹ Charles Davenport, *Eugenics, The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1911), 34. Emphasis my own.

next chapter, Davenport assailed the idea that environmental forces had any direct influence on protoplasmic material. In fact, his attempt to disabuse Americans of the false premises of Lamarckism represents one of the most sustained efforts of his professional career. Mathews, however, argued that the materialist tenets of mainline eugenic science had yet to be proven, while he clung to Lamarckism as a way of imagining an important role for religion in what was for him a *Christian* quest to redeem the human animal. Davenport and Mathews' respective positions thus denoted two competing conceptions of directing human evolution, or two different ways of resolving the evolutionary issue of human animality, with Mathews identifying Davenport's method with atheistic materialism and with Mathews associating his own approach with Christian theism.

In *The Faith of Modernism*, Mathews argued that the principles of Lamarckism were both more Christian and more scientific than materialism. Materialists like Davenport argued that humans were more or less powerless to transform the natures that they received as biological endowments, which Mathews believed made evolution an utterly *impersonal* process. "The Modernist is as emphatic [...] in his denial that evolution is a Godless impersonal process," Mathews averred. "An evolution in which an organism did not take in from its own environment elements of personality," he continued, "would be contrary to the process which science actually gives us."⁶² In Mathews' evolutionary idiom, the personality had an upward influence on the development of the human organism. The evolution of the personality allowed humans to thrive in a social life of increasing complexity and ascending morality while also exerting an upward influence upon the human organism. In insisting as much, Mathews had sufficient reason to believe that he was on scientific grounds, as Lamarckism had and even continued to hold sway in

⁶² Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 115.

scientific circles. Indeed, there were important scientific minds during the 1920s that were opposed to evolutionary materialism.⁶³ But he also had sufficient reason to insist that evolution described a Christian process. His concept of personality represented only the latest formulation within a Protestant theological tradition of attempting to think about evolution as God's creative method. Making an argument that would no doubt have stirred the sympathy of Henry Ward Beecher and Newell Dwight Hillis, Mathews wrote, "The evolutionary process is, so to speak, a moving picture of an infinite number of acts of God immanent in the universe and gradually imparting personality to that which, already in existence, grows more capable of personal action as its structure grows more complicated."⁶⁴

The main reason why Lamarckism was so important for Mathews was that it allowed him to conceive salvation as both an individual experience and an evolutionary process. For Mathews, human sinfulness described a propensity to animality; it denoted the condition of being dominated by impersonal forces. Salvation, therefore, referred to the victory of the personal over the impersonal, the subordination of the lower propensities of the human organism to the nobler faculties of the human personality, or as Mathews' once described it, the emancipation of the soul from the material plane of existence. "The gospel," Mathews declared in a 1914 public lecture, "is a message of deliverance from the natural order, from the relentless production of effect by material cause, the splendid emancipation of the soul from the physical-chemical order."⁶⁵ Such a gospel applied to individual *and* species development, with Lamarckism providing Mathews with a way of linking the deliverance of the individual with the emancipation

⁶³ Osborn, *Evolution and Religion in Education*.

⁶⁴ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 115.

⁶⁵ Box 2, Folder 1, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

of the race. As the individual grew in personality over the course of his or her lifetime, rising above the animalistic stage of existence represented by childhood, he or she cultivated a personal transcendence with respect to his or her organismic existence. The effects of this cultivation, Mathews believed, positively influenced the evolutionary development of the human race, with the structure of the organism growing more complex and refined through the hereditary influence of personality. This in turn made it possible for future generations to develop even more refined personalities. “If life has grown more personal while organisms have grown more complicated,” Mathews asserted, “this must be due in part to the influence of an environment within which there must be that which can evoke personality in the progressive series of organisms.”⁶⁶

Unlike materialists who argued that evolutionary development occurred solely by adaptations transmitted through the germ plasm, Lamarckism allowed non-materialists like Mathews to emphasize the evolutionary value of individual initiative. Since a person’s lifestyle had an effect on his or her heredity, it was absolutely important to get people to live virtuous lives. Lamarckism thus not only left ample room for individual initiative within the work to evolve a better human race, it also furnished an important space for Christianity within race uplift. In this way, Mathews’ vested interest in Lamarckism issued from an earnest desire to defend the evangelical idea that Christianity played an important part in the transformation of human nature. In fact, Mathews’ identification of Lamarckism with evangelical commitments was so strong that his work conflated the two to the point non-distinction: “As members of the Christian movement we are committed to the conviction that it is possible for an individual with God’s help to be freed from the domination of his lower inheritances, that is, to be saved.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 400.

⁶⁷ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 95.

Despite defining evolution as a redemptive process, Mathews never relinquished an individual understanding of salvation. Mathews did not believe that the effort of a virtuous life should be defined solely in terms of the contributions that it made to the development of the human race. In fact, Mathews argued that any Christian conception of salvation that envisioned redemption solely as an evolutionary process was, by itself, deficient. Salvation, Mathews insisted, must continue to speak to the exigencies and concerns of individual mortality. Hence, Mathews defended the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul because he believed it empowered the human spirit in the face of exigencies that individuals faced alone. In fact, he upheld this doctrine against materialistic frameworks that defined human immortality solely in terms of the perpetuation of the race. “Our interests in life are something vastly bigger than the maintenance of the race,” Mathews averred in his 1914 lecture. “To think of immortality as merely our individual participation in the race development is merely to substantiate [sic] social longevity for a real conception of immortality.”⁶⁸

If salvation was always evolutionary *and* individual, however, Mathews’ work characteristically emphasized the former. The defeat of human sinfulness typically described a *collective* process that enjoined humans in a cosmic struggle to free the human race from its animal nature. Comparing Fundamentalist and Modernist conceptions of the divine, Mathews wrote, “One says that God shaped the dust of the earth and breathed into it His spirit, and the other says that in the gradual process of shaping up of material organisms there came a stage in which cosmic personality –or Spirit –found new expression in some life more akin to itself.”⁶⁹ For modernists, belief in God necessitated commitment to the idea that God was working to

⁶⁸ Box 2, Folder 1, Shailer Mathews Papers, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, IL.

⁶⁹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 116.

create a being that approximated him in likeness. Evolutionary theism thus shaped modernists' conception of salvation, with Mathews arguing that God called upon humans to join him in his redemptive work. Religion, Mathews declared, "is a creative experiment carried on in cooperation with the God of that which is ever becoming."⁷⁰ Modernist theology was, therefore, characteristically evolutionary in scope, invoking a vision of God that defined evolution as an ongoing act of creation. "We do not believe that God has made His complete contribution to human evolution," Mathews avowed.⁷¹ Indeed, defining God as the "infinite Person," Mathews insisted that evolution represented "the history of an ever more complete revelation of how the infinite Person produces finite personalities."⁷² "This, in fact, is the religious reading of evolution," Mathews explained. "Our heavenly Father still is working personally in his universe."⁷³

As Mathews saw it, evolution described a creative process whereby God was gradually educating a personal being like his own from an impersonal one, which meant that, as Mathews put it, God "shares with us our own becoming."⁷⁴ Mathews' God was thus an evolutionarily immanent God, a God who was redemptively unfolding his own nature within the universe through the process of evolution. But if evolution described God's creative work, then what was unique about Christianity as a religion? How, in other words, did Christianity facilitate God's evolutionary labor? While Mathews maintained that *all* religions played a part in advancing

⁷⁰ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 421.

⁷¹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 167.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁴ Mathews, *Contributions of Science to Religion*, 421.

human evolution, he distinguished Christianity as a religion that revolved around the divine character revealed in the personality of Christ, a personality that, Mathews averred, singularly offered the means to redeeming the human animal by uniquely capturing the evolutionary perfection desired by God.

In Mathews' Christology, Jesus represented the perfect incarnation of the divine personality. As such, Christ was both an ideal for individual piety and an evolutionary paragon. He was an example for individuals to follow in developing their own personalities, but his perfect embodiment of the divine personality also made him the *telos* of human evolution. Referring to the cosmological process by which God was growing humanity beyond its animal nature, Mathews wrote, "As long as God operates in human life this process must continue toward the ideals of Jesus. To no other consummation do we dare look forward."⁷⁵ God enjoined humans to work with him in producing a human race that embodied the ideals of Christ, ideals that Mathews identified as love, cooperation, service, and sacrifice. "God cooperates with efforts to reproduce the way of Jesus," Mathews averred, offering a tenet of faith that allowed him to postulate a modernist creed: "I believe in God, immanent in the forces and process of nature, revealed in Jesus Christ and human history as Love."⁷⁶

It is here that we arrive at an answer to our question regarding how Mathews imagined modernism to be an updated form of evangelical Christianity. Mathews saw evolution as a redemptive process that would transform humanity in the likeness of Christ. The personality of Christ was thus a fundamental part of Mathews' evolutionary gospel. "Jesus Christ," Mathews wrote in *The Faith of Modernism*, "is the revelation in human experience of God's effecting

⁷⁵ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 166.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 180.

salvation. His life, death, resurrection and words offer the practicable way of fellowship with and consequent aid from God, as well as ideals for human conduct.”⁷⁷ Of course, in insisting as much, Mathews radically redefined the cosmological import of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. With his life serving as an evolutionary ideal, his death and resurrection symbolized humanity’s triumph over its animal nature through the enlargement of a personality that was increasingly Christ-like. In this way, Christ offered individuals and the race alike a chance to be “reborn,” so to speak, in the image of God, holding out the promise of a redeemed nature through evolutionary advance.

The notion that evolution represented a creative process through which God was developing a Christ-like human race represents the first of two important contributions made by Mathews to modernism in the early twentieth century. The second was the idea that God called upon humans to assist him in his evolutionary work. This idea provided modernist leaders like Mathews with an evangelical framework for engaging eugenic thought and practice. What allowed Mathews to engage eugenic thought and practice, therefore, was an evangelicalism re-wrought in evolutionary terms –a religious vision that saw evolution as a process through which God was forging human nature in the likeness of Christ and thus creating a humanity increasingly receptive to Christ’s ideals.

The Paradox of the Human Animal: Mathews and Negative Eugenics

Mathews rejected many of the scientific and racial precepts of mainline eugenics. In its materialist iterations, Mathews believed, eugenics encouraged too much focus on the impersonal forces of biology and not enough on individual aspiration to Christian ideals. Steadfastly dedicated to Lamarckism, Mathews insisted that evolution was driven not by biological forces

⁷⁷ Ibid., 80.

but by personal ones like religious nurture, which uplifted biology through the infolding of God's spirit within evolutionary processes.

And yet, Mathews' concept of personality, which always denoted a composite of the material and immaterial, impersonal and personal, speaks to the difficulty that modernists had in keeping their faith at a critical distance from eugenic thought and practice. If modernists persistently found themselves supporting eugenic initiatives, it is because, no matter how much it prioritized the personal, modernism had no way of conceiving itself or its objectives apart from resolving the evolutionary paradox of the human animal. Mathews wanted to embrace the spiritual as the driving force of evolution but in rooting the more intransigent dimensions of human nature in the animal part of the person his modernist faith could not help but insist that bad heredity imposed real constraints on the development of personality. This is why modernists like Mathews found themselves supporting mainline eugenic measures like the segregation and sterilization of the unfit.

To elucidate this point, consider William Byron Forbush's 1912 work, *The Coming Generation*. Forbush was a social worker who had worked with young men for twenty years. He published his book as part of *The Social Betterment Series* edited by Mathews. While Forbush's arguments were his own, Mathews endorsed the vision of social uplift outlined in his book, which included Christian cooperation with eugenics. As Mathews observed in his general introduction to the book, *The Coming Generation* was intended to encourage greater commitment among Christians to "social evolution."

In his work, Forbush argued that the godly evolution of human society depended upon the proper development of children, viewing evolution as a method whereby God sought to incarnate his spirit into future generations. The "secret of a great parenthood," Forbush insisted,

“is the habit of incarnation,” which made parenthood a heavenly labor through which Christian parents “put [themselves] into [their] own child.”⁷⁸ Forbush’s volume focused on the importance of the moral and intellectual nurture provided by homes, churches, and schools for the proper development of young people. Indeed, for Forbush the struggle to evolve a more righteous humanity necessitated cooperation between these institutions in order to address all spheres of children’s life –emotional, moral, and intellectual. Through their cooperation, these institutions would propagate higher ideals within future generations, accomplishing the godly work of gradually unfolding a nobler nature within the human race.

To combat degeneracy, Forbush recommended a “higher nurture” that would rear boys and girls in health and virtue and inculcate in them ideals of love, cooperation, and social service. In this labor, Forbush advocated a coordinated effort between homes, Sunday schools, YMCAs and YWCAs, public schools, universities, civic movements, reform and social organizations, and, of course, churches. But while Forbush remained principally concerned with coordinating an expansive web of Christian nurture, he also recognized the necessity of eugenics. Defining the latter as the “science of the Well Born,” Forbush dedicated an entire chapter to explicating the virtues of this “newest of the sciences.” In this chapter, Forbush urged his readers to view the propagation of healthy, virtuous children as both a religious calling and social duty. As a Christian professional who was clearly attuned to the advances of modern science, Forbush believed eugenics harmonized with Christian principles of health and nurture. “Eugenics,” Forbush wrote,

has to do with the instruction of future fathers and mothers in the laws of parenthood, in the purity of sex relations, and the consequent abolition of the transmissible diseases produced by sexual vice, in the prohibition of marriage and marriage relations between the unfit, and in the encouragement of those who are most fit for parenthood to seek its

⁷⁸ Forbush, *The Coming Generation*, 3.

opportunities and duties. In short, it desires that better people shall become better parents of better children. It would renew the world by the propagation of its strongest and best stocks.⁷⁹

As Forbush saw it, eugenics represented an important part of Christian parenthood, as it stressed clean and virtuous living on the part of the parents and a commitment to rearing clean and virtuous children. Eugenics promised progress through the propagation of a healthier, more righteous race, which harmonized with the modernist commitment to cooperating with God in his evolutionary work. But as the above passage indicates, Forbush also envisioned negative eugenic procedures as a necessary part of this commitment. Since human nature had a hereditary basis, eugenic procedures that could end the transmission of degeneracy held great promise to the modernist mission of transforming human nature. Thus, Forbush saw “asexualization” and other scientific methods as effective tools for dealing with the morally inept, criminal, and sexually perverse: “The asexualizing of the feeble-minded [sic] and of habitual criminals, especially those guilty of sexual sins, will probably be legitimized generally, as it is already in a few states. Science will give further suggestions as to the possibility of magnifying the good and minimizing the evil heritages.”⁸⁰

For Forbush, targets of asexualization included wards of the state who were beyond the repair of religious nurture. Of special concern was the “moral imbecile,” who Forbush described as “tricky and untrustworthy, capable of profuse professions and feelings but devoid of conscience. He may according to his grade, be bestial, a plotter of mischief, or possessed of genius for evil.”⁸¹ Forbush recommended segregation or sterilization for this class of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁸¹ Ibid., 195.

degenerates: “For these, if for any, is the method of asexualization justifiable, although the fact that they are known to be dangerous if at large, makes their parents, as well as the authorities, content that their sequestration from society shall be permanent.”⁸² Forbush was also concerned with feeble-minded persons in state institutions, who had the “bodies and passion of adults, but [who were] always immature in mind,”⁸³ recommending the segregation and asexualization of “congenitally abnormal children who deviated “from the standard of human nature.”⁸⁴ These eugenic practices would keep feeble-minded and otherwise unfit persons from reproducing, thereby blocking the hereditary transmission of degeneracy and halting the production of a permanent underclass comprised of people who were unable to control their baser instincts.

Forbush’s arguments testify to the appeal of negative eugenics for modernists. Modernists were concerned about heredity as a vehicle of sinfulness even if they often prioritized interventions that sought redemption chiefly through nurture. Indeed, in this way Forbush reminds us that proponents of soft heredity were often just as vociferous as hard hereditarians in their support for negative eugenic policies. Forbush saw asexualization as a viable way of ending the intergenerational cycle of degeneracy in extreme cases. More generally, however, Forbush’s theses underscore how easily eugenics could fit within modernism as a religion of life. Eugenics represented a viable part of a broader modernist initiative to cooperate with God’s evolutionary work in uplifting human nature. And this is precisely the way in which eugenics fit within the modernist agenda: as part of an extensive program of Christian nurture that joined homes,

⁸² Ibid., 193.

⁸³ Ibid., 194.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 197.

churches, and other important social institutions within the evolutionary redemption of human nature.

Mathews would have agreed with many of Forbush's recommendations, including Forbush's endorsement of negative eugenics. After all, Mathews believed there was a "genetic relationship" between biological inheritances and the personality, with the former sometimes perverting or stymying the development of the latter. The ontological paradox of the human animal made hereditarian solutions to human sinfulness an important part of modernist platforms. No matter how much Mathews preferred to emphasize the spiritual over the biological and no matter how much he criticized eugenic science for its materialism, the paradox of the human animal pushed modernists like Mathews to support eugenic interventions as part of their Christian labor to do God's evolutionary work.

Mathews' Impact on Modernist Engagements with Eugenics

Mathews' evolutionary theology provided a framework for modernist engagements with eugenics during the 1920s. Ministers followed Mathews in viewing Christ as the ethical finality of evolution and in advocating eugenic interventions within human heredity as a way of advancing God's redemptive work. In an anonymous sermon preached for the American Eugenics Society in 1926, for example, a minister opened by reflecting upon significance of Christ. Abridging Ephesians 4:13 to read, "Till we come unto a perfect man," the minister asked, "'A perfect man' –what does that mean?" The minister replied, "It means an ideal humanity; it means the fulfillment of the great Creator's plan Who said, 'Let us make man in our own image'." In a declaration that could have come from Mathews himself, the minister avowed, "Man is not yet made. The process of creation is not yet complete. It is a slow process, all creation is." The minister cited the ethical finality of Christ, a central component of the

Mathews' modernist platform, as his primary motivation for endorsing the creative work of eugenics. In a passage that underscores his modernist convictions, the minister explained his enthusiasm for eugenics,

It is the high function of science to ascertain how God works, how He creates. It is the equally high function of religion to implant in human hearts the passion of cooperation with God in his creative processes, His creative processes, which are, ultimately, redemptive processes [...] He calls upon us to be the agents and promoters of every process by which we may diminish the distance between what humanity is today, and that perfect humanity, the norm and type of which we have in Christ.⁸⁵

One of the most important contributions made by Mathews' evolutionary theism to the socialization of eugenics in the United States was the promotion of the idea that eugenics would create a more moral and spiritual human race. As a measure of transcendence with respect to human animality, the spiritual ideal of Christ sanctified eugenic discrimination. In fact, the spiritual ideal of Christ allowed evolutionary theists to imagine that they were acting out of meekness and Christ-like virtue in supporting eugenic initiatives. The inhabitants of the kingdom of God, Rev. Adams opined, "will be the MORALLY and SPIRITUALLY fit. The meek shall inherit the earth." W.F. Butler, a Methodist minister from Chandler, Arizona, agreed. "God has revealed and experience shows that in the world of human kind Christlike [sic] qualities are the more lasting. It is the meek, rather than the cruel, the vicious and the immoral, who are to inherit the earth." Statements like these demonstrate how the ethical ideal of Christ allowed contest participants to transfigure the classist face of eugenics into the genteel visage of a humble and loving servant of humanity. Frederick F. Adams, a minister from Hinesburg, Vermont, earnestly insisted to his congregants that eugenics represented the "conquest of the world by love and cooperation." The statement appears as a bold faced lie given that eugenics was inherently

⁸⁵ "1926 Contest," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

discriminatory, working through heavy-handed procedures that targeted the livelihood of the poor and socially abject. And yet the idea that eugenics was laboring for a more Christian embodiment for the human race could make eugenics seem to its supporters as something that was not mired by class or racial prejudice but, quite oppositely, as an enterprise that transcended such prejudices.

CHAPTER 5: THE GERM PLASM: CHARLES DAVENPORT AND THE SCIENCE OF RACIAL THEISM

“I believe that to secure to the next generation the smallest burden of defective development, of physical stigmata, of mental defect, of weak inhibitions, and the largest proportion of physical, mental and moral fitness, it is necessary to make careful marriage selection –not on the ground of the qualities of the individual, merely, but of his or her family traits; and I believe that I can never realized the ideals I have for my children without this basis of appropriate germinal factors.”

-Charles B. Davenport, “Eugenics as Religion,” 1916

Introduction

In 1916, America’s leading eugenicist, Charles Benedict Davenport published a eugenic analysis of Lyman Abbott in *Eugenical News*, the mouthpiece for the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Springs Harbor, New York. Davenport often published eugenic analyses of prominent Americans and used them to evince the preeminence of heredity in shaping human character and abilities. Abbott was a famous liberal Protestant intellectual, writer, and, at one time, pastor of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York. This was the same Plymouth Church in which Henry Ward Beecher delivered his sermons on evolution in the 1880s. It was also the church then pastored by Newell Dwight Hillis. Most importantly, it was a church that Davenport’s famously pious father, Amzi Davenport, helped to found and that Charles attended as a child. Davenport based his eugenic analysis on Abbott’s *Reminiscences*, which had just been published the previous year. *Reminiscences* provided an autobiographical account of the religious liberalism for which Abbott was famous. Davenport was driven to write his eugenic analysis of Abbott out of the tremendous respect he held for this towering turn-of-the-twentieth century religious figure. Davenport even wrote Abbott before the publication of his eugenic assessment, assuming a decidedly humble posture in his correspondence. “Probably you will not remember me,”

Davenport began his letter, “but you will remember my father and his family at Plymouth Church.” After deferentially asking Abbott to “strike out” in his eugenic assessment anything that appeared “unjust, untrue, or prejudicial” to Abbott or his family’s “good name,” Davenport closed his short letter by emoting his high regard for Abbott. “Let me express the great pleasure that I have had in reading your ‘Reminiscences’ during the past two or three days. It is one of the pleasures of my life that I can say I have known you and often listened to your sermons and addresses.”¹

Davenport respected Abbott’s religious liberalism, which claimed inspiration from Henry Ward Beecher and which, as Abbott himself insisted, reimagined the Christian concept of salvation as an evolutionary process of “ascent from a previous animal order.”² But if his eugenic assessment is any indication of things, Davenport’s respect had as much to do with Abbott’s heredity as it did with his evolutionary theism. The source of Abbott’s greatness as a religious innovator, Davenport’s eugenic analysis argued, was his germ plasm, which was also the thing that Davenport most chiefly revered about Abbott. In the biologicistic idiom of mainline eugenics, Davenport traced Abbott’s greatness to his New England pedigree. “With his New England blood,” Davenport wrote, Abbott “has always been strongly inhibited, unemotional, unsuggestible [*sic*], reserved, inaccessible to ‘temptations’.” Abbott, in other words, possessed salubrious and socially useful traits that were inherent to his New England breeding. “His personality, his reactions, his achievements” were, Davenport concluded, “the natural product of the parental determiners.”³ For these hereditary reasons Davenport counted Abbott among the

¹ “Abbott, Lyman.” Charles B. Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

² Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), vii-viii.

elite of American society and for these reasons as well eugenicists ought to celebrate him and applaud his work.

The purpose of this chapter is to use the writing and professional labors of Charles Davenport to demonstrate that mainline eugenics functioned as a discourse of racial theism. Unlike Horace Bushnell or Henry Ward Beecher, two discourses of racial theism already considered, Davenport seldom explicitly invoked the theological idea that God sought to propagate an elect national body out of a chosen racial stock. And yet his eugenic science both presupposed and developed racial theism. Mainline eugenics was *secularized* racial theism. It was a racial theism that presumed inborn Anglo-American providence without ever explicitly invoking it. In fact, eugenic science represents the culmination of racial theism as a theological tradition: the final collapse of any and all distinction between the natural and supernatural within the hereditary superiority of the white racial body. Davenport did not need to invoke God in declaring Abbott's hereditary election. His readership would have presupposed a theistic connection between Abbott's unique spiritual comportment, prodigious intellect, and New England pedigree. Indeed, to invoke such a pedigree was to imply providence. Bushnell's divine mandate had become completely biologized.

Davenport repudiated Lamarckism, arguing that heredity was closed off to the influence of environment. To account for racial development, Davenport insisted that hereditary changes were introduced by chemical determiners within the germ plasm. The germ plasm referred to the combined creative substance of the gametes, or sex cells, which together housed all of the hereditary determiners. Largely shut off from the influence of environment, Davenport argued, these determiners were solely responsible for the moral, mental, and physical traits of

³ Eugenics Record Office, *Eugenical News*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Apr. 1916).

individuals. Davenport thus promoted a biologicistic account of human nature, insisting that the propagation of a better race was principally a matter of breeding and not nurture. While biologicistic in scope and practice, however, mainline eugenics promoted –and was itself premised upon –a discourse of racial theism. Davenport was the direct descendent of John Davenport, the Puritan founder of New Haven, Connecticut, and a New England patriarch venerated by Charles’ father, Amzi. Charles’ work in eugenics was influenced by the New England filial piety in which he was reared. Mainline eugenics biologized the special providence associated with Puritan identity. In Davenport’s rendering, to be Puritan was to be, as Abbott was, hereditarily elect, which underscores the fact that, in becoming a completely biological category, Puritan identity retained the racial connotations of providence that it had acquired during the days of Bushnell and Beecher.

Davenport imagined eugenics as a science that could ensure the development of a superior white race. He read national history as an unrealized opportunity to develop a superior white stock and he encouraged Americans to think of eugenics as an opportunity to become “trustees” of the racial germ plasm. While Davenport never fully developed his concept of “trusteeship,” he supported the work of someone who did –namely, Albert E. Wiggam. Wiggam was incredibly important for the popularization of eugenics as a science of white racial hygiene within modernist circles. Himself a modernist, Wiggam argued that eugenics represented the fulfillment of the Christian mandate to propagate a righteous race. Wiggam’s work supplied mainline eugenics with a theological framework that helped popularize its message and initiatives. In this capacity, he did more than any other American to socialize mainline eugenics in modernist circles.

Davenport's Rejection of Propagative Religion

Throughout his public career as a eugenicist, Davenport insisted that religion was incapable of propagating a more righteous race. Indeed, Davenport's entire career was premised upon the idea that only the modern science of genetics could ensure as much. For Davenport, the propagative power of religion was sharply limited by nature. In one of the most important texts for the development of mainline eugenics in the United States, for example, Davenport wrote, "Religious teachers do grand work and the value to the state of properly developed and controlled emotions is incalculable. Yet how dependent, after all, are religious or moral teachings upon the nature of those who receive them."⁴ While none of this meant that religion was obsolete, it did mean that the focus of race propagation should fall on nature first and nurture second, with Davenport insisting that the only sure and lasting way to propagate a better race was through scientific cultivation of the germ plasm.⁵ The gist of such a message was that the path to race progress was not moral nurture but procreative sex.

Davenport understood the social value of religion primarily in propagative terms. But he also believed that religion's propagative potential was sharply limited by heredity. In a 1916 lecture that he delivered at John Harvey Kellogg's Battle Creek Sanitarium, for example, Davenport reflected on the practical value of religion for the race. "What is religion good for?" Davenport asked. He replied by arguing the "function of religion" was to "train the inhibitions in so far as they can be trained" and to thereby "secure emotional control." Inhibitions, Davenport

⁴ Charles Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 255.

⁵ In an unpublished manuscript for a biology textbook, Davenport reflected upon the overwhelming power of nature. Speaking of the germ plasm's chromosomes, he wrote, "[N]othing passes from generation to generation except through them. So fateful, indeed, are the chromosomes that had they been known 2 [sic] millennia ago the Greeks would probably have created a temple to them." "From Generation to Generation," Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

explained, “require direction and training during development in childhood” and the task of religion was to introduce “special motives” that could properly guide said development. Christianity worked by training children to subordinate their instinctual drives to their love for Christ, who Davenport described as a “wholly good, gentle and self-sacrificing hero” who represented a religious idealization of the human “instinct of love.” Arguing from a eugenic standpoint, however, Davenport claimed that the propagative power of Christianity was circumscribed by heredity. This was because not everyone possessed a capacity for the self-sacrificing love represented by Christ. One simply could not cultivate the ruling inhibition of selfless love when the trait for such was lacking in a particular individual, stock, or even race. This alleged genetic fact prompted Davenport to convey an important lesson to his Battle Creek audience about the uniqueness of eugenics as a new paradigm for race betterment. Contrasting mainline eugenics with established ideas about Christian nurture, Davenport declared, eugenics “is based on the principle that nothing can take the place of innate qualities. While it recognizes the value of [religion] it insists that culture of a trait is futile, where the germs of the trait are absent.”⁶

Davenport’s biologically reductionistic view of heredity undermined prevailing ideas regarding the power of Christian nurture, even ideas that had held sway in Davenport’s childhood home. Davenport’s mother, Jane Joralemon Dimon, professed a faith that revolved around her maternal obligation to rear godly children. One of Jane’s most trusted references was Gorham D. Abbott’s 1843 guidebook, *The Mother’s Friend: Or Familiar Directions for Forming the Mental and Moral Habits of Young Children*.⁷ Like Horace Bushnell’s more famous

⁶ “Eugenics as Religion,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Christian Nurture, Abbott's book propounded an organic view of human nature, enjoining mothers to embrace their roles as shapers of their children's character. From Abbott's book, Jane learned to understand her love for her children as something "instinctive," to think of childhood in the naturalistic framework of "seed-time," and to sanctify motherhood as part of God's "great moral purpose" for propagating love and goodness.⁸ Through his training as an evolutionary biologist, however, Charles came to believe that the propagative power of maternal virtue was much more limited than his mother had assumed. The moral nurture of Christian mothers could only bring out what latent potentialities preexisted in the germ plasm. As Davenport put it in his textbook on eugenic science, "Religion would be a much more effective thing if everybody had a healthy emotional nature; and it can do nothing at all with natures that have not the elements of love, loyalty, and devotion."⁹

Mainline eugenics undermined two ideas that were fundamental for New England propagative piety. The first was that nurture corrected for bad heredity. The second was that nurture directly influenced racial development. Both of these ideas were firmly embedded in middle class New England culture during the early part of Davenport's career. Indeed, common sense about heredity during the rise of mainline eugenics was pretty much the same as it had been during the late nineteenth century. The widespread view in white middle class culture assumed a fluid and open reciprocity between nurture and nature: the prevailing atmosphere of the home –which could be spiritually regenerative, degenerative or somewhere in between –was

⁷ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 123.

⁸ Gorham D. Abbott, *The Mother's Friend: Or Familiar Directions for Forming the Mental and Moral Habits of Young Children* (Cooperstown, NY: H. & E. Phinney, 1843), 33.

⁹ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 255.

literally suffused into the physiological development of children, a suffusion that, for better or worse, had a hereditary influence on future generations. In this Lamarckian understanding of heredity, nurture and nature folded together to the point of being indistinct from one another, but the emphasis was always on nurture as a means of affecting both individual and racial development. Indeed, since moral influence mediated the effects of heredity, cultures of white degeneracy that allegedly prevailed in impoverished homes and that impeded racial development could be corrected over the long term through environmental reforms. This popular understanding of heredity, as previous chapters attest, was immensely important for the racialization and domestication of middle class New England piety, the same brand of piety that Abbott's book on maternal nurture helped to institutionalize within the Davenport household. And yet Davenport's science of eugenics undermined prevailing ideas about heredity. Most importantly, mainline eugenics rejected the notion that Christian nurture functioned as a regenerative force. Instead, it argued that nature provided –or *did not* provide –the materials upon which nurture worked. The difference with respect to religion and race propagation was anything but trivial.

The Science of Mainline Eugenics

Mainline eugenics was made possible by two late nineteenth century developments in the study of heredity. The first was August Weismann's theory of the germ plasm. A German evolutionary biologist who embodied the waxing spirit of scientific materialism, Weismann strove to uncover those discernible, mechanistic, and "actual processes upon which the phenomenon of heredity depend."¹⁰ As part of his biologicistic framework, Weismann defined the germ plasm as the "hereditary substance contained in the [nuclei of the] germ cells" or

¹⁰ August Weismann, *The Germ Plasm: A Theory of Heredity*, trans. W. Newton Parker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), ix.

gametes.¹¹ It was the germ plasm, Weismann argued, that contained “all primary constituents which are necessary for the formation of the organism.”¹²

Weismann saw his work as an important corrective to theories of heredity that advocated “pangenesis,” or the idea that the cells of the body participated in the production of hereditary materials.¹³ The notion of pangenesis supported Lamarckian models of heredity that dominated the nineteenth century. Pangenesis also supported popular understandings of heredity that underwrote the propagative view of Christianity developed by Bushnell and others, allowing one to imagine that the regenerative power of nurture influenced hereditary substances through the development of the body. Weismann, however, rejected the idea that the “soma” (or cells of the body) played a part in the production of hereditary materials. The germinal substances were closed off from the soma, with the germ plasm representing a kind of hereditary vector that transcended the generational influence of nurture. This meant that any change affected by heredity happened through changes introduced by the germ plasm itself and not through the regenerative or degenerative influence of environment. In this way, Weismann’s theory of the germ plasm imagined a unidirectional relationship between genotype and phenotype and thus undermined the “usually accepted view” that acquired characteristics were transmitted from one generation to the next.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Ibid., 12.

¹³ Weismann stated, “I believe that all parts of the body do not contribute to produce germ from which the new individual arises, but that, on the contrary, the offspring owes it origin to a peculiar substance of extremely complicated structure, viz., the ‘germ-plasm’.” Ibid., xi.

¹⁴ Weismann wrote, “My conclusions led me to doubt the usually accepted view of the *transmission of variations acquired* by the body (soma); and in further research, combined with

Mainline eugenics combined Weismann's theory with another nineteenth century development in hereditary knowledge: Mendel's work on the transmission of traits. Davenport synthesized Weismann and Mendel's research through his experimental work in animal breeding, through which Davenport was able to study Mendelian laws of inheritance and theorize about the genotypic functioning of the germ plasm. Davenport's early efforts to organize a eugenics program grew out of his involvement with the American Breeders Association, one of the earliest organizations in the country to promote research in Mendelism.¹⁵ Bringing Weismann and Mendel together, Davenport speculated that the germ plasm housed hereditary "determiners," chemical substances that, either directly or in combination with one another, produced all of a person's physical and mental characteristics. Determiners, Davenport theorized, followed Mendelian patterns of inheritance, with dominant traits being associated with the presence of a determiner and recessive traits being associated with its lack.¹⁶ Transmitted inter-generationally through the germ plasm, these determiners represented discrete, quantifiable objects of scientific analysis, holding out the possibility that the complexity of human life could be reduced to the relatively closed interplay of these biological substances. In this respect, Davenport was especially optimistic. Indeed, the good news of eugenic science was that traits "are inheritable, they are independent of each other, and they may be combined in any desirable mosaic."¹⁷

experiments, tended more to strengthen my conviction that in point of fact no such transmission occurs." Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ "American Breeders Association," Charles B. Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁶ Charles Davenport, *The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 9.

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of the trait for the vision of social reform promised by eugenic science. Davenport insisted that all human mental and emotional characteristics could be identified and mapped according to Mendelian laws of inheritance as simply as physical traits like eye and hair color. In fact, the bulk of Davenport's prestige as America's leading eugenicist was staked upon the idea that this was the case. In 1912, for example, he published *The Trait Book*, which attempted a full inventory of genetically isolatable human characteristics. Listing hundreds of physical traits, the little book also catalogued mental traits like "curiosity," "imagination," "logicalness," "boldness," "conceit," and "love of power."¹⁸ It even listed "special abilities" like "mathematics," "musical composition," and "mechanics."¹⁸ Davenport went so far as to suggest that a person's propensity to a particular career followed Mendelian patterns of inheritance, while intimating that, given adequate research, all human traits would be identified and inventoried in terms of their social value.¹⁹ In some ways, the book is a testament to the audacity of eugenic science. As one contemporary geneticist reminds us, mainline eugenicists like Davenport outstripped their comprehension of genetics when they supposed that human behavior, like eye color, was so easily quantifiable.²⁰ But the book is also a record of the appeal of the trait as a hereditary paradigm. Isolatable and material, the trait made race propagation a quantifiable thing, foretelling a day when eugenics would literally engineer a better body politic.

¹⁷ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 6.

¹⁸ Charles Davenport, *The Trait Book* (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Eugenics Record Office, 1912) 21-30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-12.

²⁰ Maynard V. Olson, "Davenport's Dream," *Davenport's Dream: 21st Century Reflections on Heredity and Eugenics*, eds. Jan. A Witkowski and John R. Inglis (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2008), 77-98.

Mainline eugenics had consequences for the problem of race degeneracy. Most importantly, it decreed that the fight against degeneracy ought to revolve around better breeding and not environmental interventions that sought race betterment by introducing higher moral standards to lower class cultures. For Davenport, degeneracy was not transmitted through culture but through the germ plasm, which meant that rehabilitative efforts aimed at inculcating higher hygienic ideals within cultures of poverty would ultimately fail. Hence, one of the primary contribution of mainline eugenics toward the problem of race degeneracy was that it redefined the concept of feeble-mindedness which had, since the late nineteenth century, been a term used in professional circles to refer to the moral weakness allegedly propagated into the race through poor white cultures. Feeble-mindedness referred to low intelligence but also to the hereditary disposition of being “feebly inhibited” when it came to suppressing baser instincts.²¹ Davenport and other eugenicists argued that feeble-mindedness was not a cultural force but the result of a trait whose determiners followed Mendelian patterns of inheritance.²² Eugenicists argued that such a trait could be blocked by segregating or sterilizing people who supposedly possessed it, thereby neutralizing a preeminent source of race degeneracy.

In Davenport’s vision, eugenic science made it possible to identify traits that were useful and deleterious to the race and map their transmission across the country. The idea that traits could be identified, tracked, and eliminated helped popularize eugenic studies of white degeneracy during the teens and twenties. These influential studies sought to explain the propagation of poverty, criminality, and sexual licentiousness in rural white America by tracking the hereditary transmission of feeble-mindedness. Earlier studies in race degeneracy explained

²¹ Eugenics Record Office, *Eugenical News*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Feb. 1916).

²² Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 66-67.

feeble-mindedness in terms of both nature *and* nurture and prioritized interventions that championed environmental reforms. By the 1910s and '20s, however, eugenic science provided these family studies with a new biological language for codifying feeble-mindedness. With mainline eugenicists arguing that feeble-mindedness followed Mendelian patterns of transmission, eugenics held out the possibility that one could track and then eliminate hereditary determiners associated with white pauperism. By reducing complex social phenomena to discrete, quantifiable, and heritable chemical substances, mainline eugenicists successfully convinced privileged white Americans that modern science could locate and eliminate the sources of race degeneracy.²³ Indeed, at least some of the appeal of such a message had to do with the easy and efficient contrast it offered when compared to solutions to degeneracy that revolved around environmental interventions. Sterilization, for example, could seem a far easier answer to the intransigence of white pauperism than moral reform.

By the 1920s, the idea that feeble-mindedness represented a genetically transmitted condition that nurture was powerless to correct became widely accepted in large part thanks to mainline eugenics organizations like the ERO and the AES. The eugenic view of degeneracy became so influential in fact that it played a direct role in the US Supreme Court's 1927 decision in *Buck v. Bell*, which established the constitutionality of eugenic sterilization and provided the legal groundwork for the enactment and enforcement of sterilization laws across the country. The Court's decision in this landmark case upheld the eugenic sterilization of Carrie Buck, an inmate of a feeble-minded institution in Virginia whose reproductivity posed a social threat in so far as she allegedly bore the trait for feeble-mindedness. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes captured the

²³ For a short comprehensive history and edited inventory of eugenic family studies, see Nicole Hahn Rafter ed., *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

eugenic understanding of feeble-mindedness in the Court's decision, when, appraising Buck's condition, he famously declared, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."²⁴ As far as both eugenic science and Holmes were concerned, Buck's "condition" had nothing to do with class, culture, or nurture. She was feeble-minded because her germ plasm made her that way and she needed to be kept from passing on her tainted germinal material to future generations.

Mainline eugenicists like Davenport justified negative eugenic policies like immigration restriction, eugenic sterilization, and anti-miscegenation laws as policies that were of immediate value to the protection and enhancement of the racial germ plasm. In professional eugenicists' minds, traits did not belong to the individual. Traits were national resources. And this meant that traits had to be identified, assessed, and regulated with respect to their impact on the race's biological potential. Immigration restriction, for example, was a policy that Davenport justified explicitly in terms of protecting the racial germ plasm against degenerate traits. "[I]t is not too much to say," Davenport wrote, "that the future of our nation depends on the perpetuation by reproduction of our best protoplasm in proper matings and we cannot have proper matings unless our *best protoplasm is located and known*."²⁵ This eugenic will to knowledge included a proposal to eugenically screen all immigrants who entered the country in order to identify and assess the determiners that they would be introducing to the racial germ plasm.²⁶

²⁴ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 111.

²⁵ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 249. Italics in the original.

²⁶ The link between the eugenic conception of the germ plasm as a national resource and the issue of immigration is reflected in the following passage penned by Davenport: "Could we take a bird's eye view of the continent and were each individual that bears a certain trait conspicuously marked we could have a perfect picture of the geographic distribution of the trait. Such a view would show us the traits coming across the ocean from European centres, settling in a place or flitting from point to point, reproducing themselves at a place and continuing to

The Mainline Eugenic Way to Race Betterment

The solution to race degeneracy offered by mainline eugenics was quite different than those that claimed religious inspiration. As discussed in preceding chapters, modernists like Hillis and Mathews believed that Christian principles and ideals supplied critical resources for fighting race degeneracy, especially in educating young men and women about the virtues of righteous living. In these and other religiously inspired visions of race betterment, the fight against degeneracy often revolved around building Christian homes. Thus, for example, in *The Coming Generation* William Forbush imagined the struggle against race degeneracy as a matter of training young men and women in Christian ideals of parenthood, which involved teaching them the importance of sexual purity and training them in both religious and scientific principles of childrearing. Forbush's vision of race betterment contrasted sharply with Davenport's. Instead of envisioning a eugenics program that revolved around the deployment of hygienic culture, Davenport saw the fight against degeneracy as matter of trait selection. Of course, this did not obviate hygienic culture. Nor did it render superfluous the need for racially wholesome homes. But it did drastically alter how one should understand the social office of parenthood.

Davenport encouraged parents to think of themselves not, first and foremost, as nurturers of their children's development, but rather, as transmitters of germ plasm. Thus, Davenport called upon present and future parents to conceive their marital duty in the following terms: "I believe that I am the trustee of the germ plasm that I carry, that this has been passed on to me through thousands of generations before me; and that I betray the trust if, (the germ plasm being good) I so act as to jeopardize it, with its excellent possibilities, or, from motives of personal

increase there for generations while throwing off individuals to move far athwart the face of the country and to settle down as new proliferating centres." Ibid., 181.

convenience, to unduly limit offspring.”²⁷ While still revolving around the sacred office of parenthood, Davenport described the fight against degeneracy not in terms of hygienic culture but in terms of trusteeship of germ plasm. Again, this is not to say that hygienic culture was unimportant for him. It most certainly was. It is to say, however, that Davenport made the struggle against degeneracy less about calibrating the moral economy of the home and more about controlling the production of bad germ plasm through reproductive sex.

By the teens, Davenport’s genetic approach to fighting race degeneracy was gaining prominence while also consolidating scientific authority over the question of race betterment. This is evidenced by the reaction that mainline eugenics provoked among those who belonged to other professional fields, especially education, domestic economy, and public hygiene. At the First National Conference on Race Betterment in 1914, for example, Mrs. Melvil Dewey, an advocate of eugenics, argued that eugenics overreached its knowledge. The only tried and true way of ensuring race progress, she insisted, involved scientific collaboration between all the professional fields involved in public health. Race betterment, in other words, could not be reduced to trait selection, as Davenport maintained, but necessitated interventions that improved all aspects of human life, including “pure food and water, fresh air, sound sleep, safe exercise, cleanliness and sanitary conditions.”²⁸ Dewey was an acolyte of Ellen H. Richards, the scientist and social reformer who first coined the term “eugenics” in 1905 and who published a book defining eugenics’ scope and aims in 1910. Dewey represented Richards, who died three years before the conference and who, like many other reformers, argued that the struggle against

²⁷ “Eugenics as Religion,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁸ Mrs. Melvil Dewey, “Eugenics and its Founder,” *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment* (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 98.

degeneracy was as complex as life itself, necessitating a multidisciplinary approach that worked through social, medical, scientific, and even religious organizations. Eugenics challenged the wisdom of eugenics, however, by insisting that the issue of degeneracy was reducible to the interaction of chemical substances in the germ plasm. And in this way eugenics claimed the issue of race betterment nearly exclusively for itself.

That mainline eugenics encroached on the domain of public health professionals is evidenced by Dewey's paper at the 1914 conference. Dewey argued that eugenic science was still largely unproven and that its applications for race betterment were yet to be determined. In crafting her argument, Dewey separated eugenics and eugenics into distinct fields of inquiry and application, providing a point-by-point contrast between the two:

Eugenics deals with race improvement through heredity. Eugenics deals with race improvement through environment. Eugenics is hygiene for future generations. Eugenics is hygiene for the present generation. Eugenics must await careful investigation. Eugenics has immediate opportunity. Eugenics precedes eugenics, developing better men now, and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future.²⁹

Dewey's argument against the immediate uses of eugenic knowledge represents an attempt to protect educators and public hygiene workers' professional authority over the question of race betterment. Her paper, which so defensively drew lines between sciences that focused on human environments and those that focused on human heredity, can be understood as a response to Davenport's success in convincing Americans that the germ plasm represented the only correct way of understanding the perpetuation of degeneracy. At the 1914 conference, Davenport did not directly respond to Dewey, but he did confidently assert that race betterment entailed "bringing home to the American people the importance of heredity." "Above all," Davenport asserted, this meant teaching Americans "the importance of marrying, marrying well and having healthy,

²⁹ Ibid., 99.

effective children –and plenty of them.”³⁰ It was *this* vision of race betterment –one rooted in the genetic concept of germ plasm and anchored in the eugenic practice of better breeding –that was rapidly coming to predominate in professional circles during the teens.

By the late teens, mainline eugenics was having an impact on modernist Protestant thought. Those who wanted to craft working alliances between religion and science in the pursuit of race betterment could no longer ignore the claims that Davenport made with respect to the germ plasm. The most significant consequence of this shift in American eugenics discourse was that, if they wanted to stay relevant in professional circles, modernists had to give up Lamarckism and concede a much more limited role for nurture. Elliot Rowland Downing’s short introduction to heredity, *The Third and Fourth Generation*, is revealing in this respect. Downing was Professor of Natural Science at the University of Chicago at the time of the book’s publication. Written for The University of Chicago Publications in Religious Education, a series edited by Shailer Mathews, Downing’s book attempted to “consider frankly and seriously the scientific facts regarding the problem commonly called ‘eugenics’.” Espousing a modernist faith, Downing argued that, while the religious import of eugenics was not immediately apparent, it nonetheless posed important questions for the Christianization of society. As Downing wrote in his preface, “The religious significance of a reverent and thoughtful understanding of this highly interesting subject is at once apparent when one thinks of the perfecting of human society as the goal of the divine plan.” Christians, Downing insisted, could supply “the spiritual significance of

³⁰ Charles Davenport, “The Importance to the State of Eugenic Investigation,” *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment* (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 455-56.

the evolutionary goal” sought by mainline eugenicists, which would be the perfection of the human race.³¹

Yet while Downing believed that Christians should accept and even sanctify the work of eugenics, he also demonstrated how doing as much necessitated relinquishing outdated ideas, especially the idea that acquired characteristics were inheritable. Dutifully conveying the scientific principles of eugenics, Downing averred, “It is the germ plasm that gives rise to the soma plasm, not the reverse.”³² “[A]cquired characters, which are modifications that impress the body plasm only,” he concluded, “can not be transmitted.”³³ *The Third and Fourth Generation* proved popular. It went through four editions by 1926. It is worth noting that Davenport reviewed Downing’s little book favorably: “We have traveled far in the past 50 years since the time when the name of evolutionist had the same sort of connotation as infidel or profligate, to the present when a series in Religious Education publishes the book of a modern biologist on heredity and eugenics prepared for classes in the Sunday school and for the reading of ministers.”³⁴

Was Downing confused? The idea that the germ plasm was closed off from the influence of nurture would seem to undermine religious interest in race betterment. After all, how could religious leaders imagine an important role in the fight against degeneracy when degeneracy itself issued through biological materials and thus so clearly constituted an object for genetic

³¹ Elliott Rowland Downing, *The Third and Fourth Generation: An Introduction to Heredity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), viii.

³² Ibid., 107.

³³ Ibid., 111.

³⁴ “Book Reviews.” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

interventions alone? As we will see in the final section of this chapter, however, the rising orthodoxy of eugenic science did not necessarily oppose evolutionary biologists like Davenport against innovators like Downing who wanted to maintain an important place for Christianity in race betterment. In fact, Downing turns out to be prophetic. Led by the efforts of innovating modernists, many religious writers and clergymen during the 1920s adapted to the waxing orthodoxy of eugenic science by attempting to deify the germ plasm as a sacred creative vessel. Before we explore this fascinating aspect of American eugenics, however, we must first investigate the origins of Davenport's racial theism.

Mainline Eugenics as Racial Theism

Davenport's eugenic assessment of Abbott underscores the way in which eugenicists regarded New England as an exemplary stock. Davenport praised Abbott's New England "blood." As Davenport and others used it, blood referred to the concept of consanguinity. Not a scientific term like germ plasm, trait, or determiner, blood was eugenic shorthand for the idea that certain mental and physical dispositions were propagated into stocks. "Blood will tell," for example, was a popular eugenic refrain. The adage was used as a way of conveying the alleged fact that a person's stock, for better or worse, determined a person's potential. The notion that Abbott possessed New England blood thus denotes the eugenic understanding of New England as consanguineous group, or as an extended network of intermarrying families that had supposedly bred a unique stock, with a peculiar mental and moral bearing. In this way, it highlights the fact that eugenicists looked to New England as a model of hereditary fitness. Eugenicists like Davenport idealized early New England settlers as especially hearty people who possessed traits of ingenuity and industry. These were, after all, people who had the courage, fortitude, and intellect to traverse an entire ocean and flourish in the harsh conditions of the American frontier. Abbott was a descendant of these hearty people, a bearer of New England

blood, which was a way of saying that Abbott belonged to an elect racial stock. Abbott's inhibition, impassiveness, intellectualism, and peculiar religiosity: these were the distinctive marks of his New England pedigree.

Davenport's eugenic portrait of Abbott helps us to clarify the relationship between mainline eugenics, on the one hand, and the concept of race, on the other. Modern biological science allowed eugenicists like Davenport to recodify the concept of race in the genetic language of Mendelism. It also provided an idiom for advancing three specific ideas with respect to race as a biological category. First, mainline eugenicists believed that there were constitutional differences between races. Races possessed different germinal determiners that registered through specific somatic traits. Thus, Davenport was especially concerned with identifying traits that were particular to races. In his influential introduction to eugenic science, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, for example, Davenport theorized that the Irish were genetically disposed to "alcoholism" but that they also tended to possess traits of "sympathy," "chastity," and "leadership of men." Southern Italians lacked "self-sufficing individualism" but they frequently demonstrated "patience," "unflagging industry," and "capacity for hard monotonous labor." Davenport believed that reading racial differences in terms of the presence and transmission of distinct germinal substances had direct consequences for the way in which Americans ought to conceive race betterment. As he wrote, "The fact is that no race *per se* [...] is dangerous and none undesirable; but only those individuals whose somatic traits or germinal determiners are, from the standpoint of social life, bad."³⁵

Second, eugenicists argued that a race's somatic traits determined its social use and position: some races possessed traits that disposed them to lead, others possessed traits that

³⁵ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 222.

disposed them to follow; some possessed traits that made them natural laborers, others bore traits that inclined them to innovation. Lastly, and this is where Lyman Abbott comes back into the picture, all races were comprised of superior and inferior stocks. Abbott was not just white. He was old stock New England, which specified the superior somatic comportment of his whiteness.

It is not incidental to the story of American eugenics that Davenport was himself of New England stock. Charles was a direct descendent of John Davenport, the famous puritan leader and founder of New Haven, Connecticut, who arrived along with five hundred settlers on New England shores in 1638. Davenport's puritan ancestry helps to explain his career in eugenics. In fact, studies of Anglo-American eugenics suggest that it played as important a role in his professional career as his training in evolutionary biology.

Davenport argued that the goal of eugenics was to build a perfect society, or as he also once put it, a "united, altruistic, God-serving, law-abiding, effective and productive nation."³⁶ The idea that eugenics could produce a more "God-serving" nation is an interesting claim, especially coming from a man who had little use for traditional religion. But it helps to confirm an argument made by journalist Harry Bruinius, who argues that, in ideological scope and promise, eugenics was inspired by the theocratic visions of social perfection espoused by early puritans like John Davenport. Charles Davenport was not only a direct descendant of John Davenport, Bruinius, suggests. He was also an inheritor of his famous forebear's quest to "raise up a new social order, holy and pure." Indeed, in Bruinius' estimation, one cannot fully understand Charles' career without apprehending how, in significant ways, his work represented a scientific version of the puritan quest to construct "A City Upon a Hill."³⁷ In this way,

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

Bruinius helps us to see how Davenport's career as a professional eugenicist was in no small part influenced by a uniquely American millennialist pathos that he had come to embody as part of his puritan identity.

Davenport's puritan identity also helps to explain why he often imagined old stock New England as a eugenically elect people who would build an ideal society. Davenport, for example, viewed Abbott as hereditarily special, even if Abbott did not identify himself in such a way. In significant ways, therefore, mainline eugenics reimagined puritan concepts of election and predestination in hereditarian terms. No matter how biologicistic Davenport's science was, it retained the racialized sense of election that Bushnell ascribed to New England. Just as Bushnell had re-envisioned New England as a "seed" and encouraged this elect race to conquer the world through its propagative power, Davenport reconceived old stock New England as a eugenic ideal whose hereditary fitness served as a model for a perfect society. Thus, while Davenport's eugenics program pursued societal perfection through breeding, revolving around the reproduction of a better race instead of the propagation of religious ideals, his work nonetheless inflected a Calvinist concept of election through its hereditarianism.

Of course, Davenport did not fancy himself a modern day puritan, at least not in the traditional religious sense of the term. Yet Davenport certainly understood himself as *racially* puritan, and this self-understanding shaped his career profoundly. That this is the case is evidenced by the kind of religious piety in which Davenport was reared.

Davenport's Filial Piety

Amzi, Charles' father, taught his son to view himself as a member of a providentially elect family. Amzi was so proud of his puritan ancestry, in fact, that he wrote, *A History and*

³⁷ Harry Bruinius, *Better for All the World: The Secret History of Forced Sterilization and America's Quest for Racial Purity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 109.

Genealogy of the Davenport Family. Published in 1851, fifteen years before Charles was born, the book traced twenty-five generations of Davenports, beginning with the founding of the Davenport title and estate in England in 1086 and proceeding through John Davenport and his New England descendants. At the time, the book was considered to be a major accomplishment of genealogical study, with one reviewer calling it the “most elaborate book of that sort ever published in the country.”³⁸ Amzi dedicated his volume to all of John Davenport’s descendants, “who cherish the principles, emulate the virtues, and illustrate the example of their distinguished ancestor.”³⁹ The book, as Bruinius argues, should be understood as a fundamental part of Amzi’s piety.⁴⁰ But it also marks a shift from understanding the puritans as an elect community bound by a distinct religious vision to comprehending them as a special racial stock. In this way, the book can be understood as the germ for Charles’ eugenic comprehension of puritans as New England blood.

The societal and familial dimensions of Amzi’s piety had the biggest impact on his son’s career in eugenics. Amzi’s faith revolved around personal acceptance of Christ as one’s “all sufficient Savior and Redeemer.” Salvation brought about changes within the person that were necessary for the foundation of a more god-like society, and Amzi was especially concerned with producing such. Amzi participated in the founding of new churches in New York, including Beecher’s in Brooklyn, while also agitating for social causes like abolition.⁴¹ The real fruits of

³⁸ The Stamford Historical Society, Inc., “Portrait of a Family: Stamford through the Legacy of the Davenports: Amzi Benedict Davenport, 1817-1894,” Stamford Historical Society, 2009. Available online at http://www.stamfordhistory.org/dav_amzi.htm. Accessed 1/28/16.

³⁹ Amzi Davenport, *A History and Genealogy of the Davenport Family* (New York: W. Benedict, 1851), iii.

⁴⁰ Bruinius, *Better for All the World*, 109.

religion for Amzi were thus socio-political, an idea that he had no doubt embraced as part of his proud puritan ancestry. As Francis J. Bremer observes, John Davenport had a “historical reputation as the most puritan of New England puritan leaders,” having founded New Haven with the purpose of invoking in “its citizens the responsibilities involved in striving for biblical perfection.”⁴² Like his distinguished forbear, Amzi’s piety stressed the reformation of the world, viewing personal piety as the foundation of a model Christian society. In his introduction, Amzi referred to “the Puritan Fathers of New England” as “constructors of society,” whose integrity and faith “laid the foundations of that mighty edifice which they were about to build, upon a broad and imperishable basis.”⁴³ Amzi believed that present day New Englanders were responsible for preserving their righteous ancestors’ faith in a Christian polity.

But if Amzi’s faith was societal, it was also familial. Altogether, Amzi fathered 12 children with two wives, a fact that Bruinius uses to support the idea that “foremost among” Amzi’s religious sensibilities was his dutiful obedience to “God’s command in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply.”⁴⁴ As Bruinius and others observe, Amzi was often exacting when it came to his children’s discipline and moral integrity.⁴⁵ In this respect, his domestic piety contrasted sharply with Jane’s, Charles’ mother and Amzi’s second wife, who was a much warmer, more nurturing figure. Importantly, scholars have understood Charles’ turn toward science during his

⁴¹ Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 49.

⁴² Francis J. Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.

⁴³ Davenport, *A History and Genealogy of the Davenport Family*, v.

⁴⁴ Bruinius, *Better for All the World*, 109.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

adolescence as a part of his rebellion against his father's austere love. One scholar also sees Charles' unyielding scientism as a reproduction of Amzi's own unflinching religiosity.⁴⁶

But *A History and Genealogy of the Davenport Family* reveals a more profound dimension of Amzi's piety. Amzi imagined his book as a guide for New England families, especially fathers. In his preface, he wrote, "After much labor bestowed, in collecting and preparing materials, the work is sent forth as a *vade mecum* to the Family, with the hope that it may stimulate the present and future generations, to emulate the piety, the love of civil and religious liberty, and that devotion to 'the common welfare of all', which characterized the Puritan fathers of New England."⁴⁷ Central to Amzi's work was the figure of John Davenport. The book celebrated the famous puritan not only as a model of piety but also as a New England patriarch. The narrative of the book thus revolved around Davenport's life and labors, especially his founding of New Haven, Connecticut. The book's appendices even included a selection of Davenport's sermons and letters and a catalogue of his works. In this respect, John Davenport's life, work, and ideals presented a model for contemporary New England fathers to emulate as patriarchs of their own families. As part of their piety, Amzi's book suggested, they were to imagine themselves as progenitors of New England's "future generations" just as Davenport himself had fathered New England.

Amzi's book demonstrates the rising importance of genealogy during the nineteenth century as a method or concept for understanding the importance of family and familial identity. While the book revolved around the biography of John Davenport, it also narrated the patrilineal descent of the Davenport family through twenty-five generations. It began with the founding of

⁴⁶ Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 52.

⁴⁷ Davenport, *A History and Genealogy of the Davenport Family*, vii.

the Davenport title and estate by Ormus de Dauneporte in 1086 and ended with the birth of Thomas Davenport, born on September 3, 1849. Thomas, Amzi documented, was the five-hundredth descendant of Ormus. The entire genealogical narrative, which spanned over seven hundred and fifty years, revolved around two organizing concepts: “marriage” and “issue.” Amzi defined marriage solely in terms of its genealogical function. It denoted not a relationship of property or the passing of an estate but a procreative relationship. Marriage produced issues, a term that meant something similar to “descendants” but that should be distinguished from “heir,” if by the latter one means the inheritor of property or an estate. Issue was a reproductive concept. It redefined inheritance strictly in terms of genealogy itself. Amzi, for example, was the three hundred and forty sixth issue of Ormus de Dauneporte, which meant that his inheritance was defined not in terms of patrimonial transmission of an estate (the original Davenport estate was in England) but in terms of his status as both descendent and propagator of a godly patrilineal line that reached back to the founding of the family name.

A History and Genealogy of the Davenport Family evinces a reconceptualization of patriarchy in propagative terms. The familial and social authority of early puritan fathers, as Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg argue, rested on their “control of landed property or craft skills.”⁴⁸ Paternal authority was tied to a father’s land, which a father divided between his sons and deeded to them, or to his trade, which a father also passed along to his male heirs. Mintz and Kellogg maintain that this basis for paternal power in puritan New England began to erode over the course of the eighteenth century due to a number of reasons, especially the “breakdown of the conception of marriage as a property settlement involving the division of family land.”⁴⁹ A

⁴⁸ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 9.

new model of marriage emerged in the nineteenth century that reconceived parental authority in terms of the “care and proper nurture of children.”⁵⁰ Amzi’s book represents an early attempt to reconceive paternal authority in terms of a propagative model of marriage. In place of land, Amzi substituted genealogy, attempting to achieve what one might describe as a re-territorialization of paternal power. A father’s authority was no longer rooted in his property, Amzi’s book suggested, but in the genealogy or ancestry that he bequeathed to his children. His authority would be measured by his ability to propagate future generations that measured up to the family name. It should be emphasized that Amzi did not conceive such a responsibility apart from religious duty but as a fundamental part of piety itself. To be a both the issue and perpetuator of a godly familial line was to submit oneself to God’s purposes for New England.

Following Ava Chamberlain, one might describe Amzi’s religiosity as “filiopietistic” and historicize his book as part of the “colonial revival period of the latter nineteenth century.”⁵¹ This period, as Chamberlain argues following the work of Joseph A. Conforti, witnessed the transformation of New England into “an ethnic identity” and the valorization of colonial New England figures as embodiments of American ideals.⁵² The filial turn to the past that characterizes the colonial revival period occurred in the face of increasing immigration and industrialization and thus accompanied New Englanders’ growing concern over cultural change. Jonathan Edwards, as Chamberlain shows, was resurrected at this time as an icon of American

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Ava Chamberlain, *The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle: Marriage, Murder, and Madness in the Family of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 165.

⁵² Ibid., 163. Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 94.

virtue: “In contrast to the ethnic immigrants rapidly filling the squalid tenements of urban slums,” Chamberlain writes, “Edwards embodied the manly, morally earnest, strenuous life that Victorians imagined their puritan ancestors had pursued in their orderly villages.” Importantly, the “ancestor worship” that became common at this time was enabled by the increasing availability of colonial records, which New Englanders like Amzi used to construct genealogies in order to make “contact with their colonial pasts.”⁵³ Indeed, the ethnic idealization of puritan patriarchs witnessed the rise of genealogy as a method for understanding the peculiar history of New England as a people.

Not only does Chamberlain argue that eugenics further developed the filial piety of the colonial revival era, she also maintains that Charles Davenport’s work represents a development of his own father’s religiosity. “Charles Davenport inherited his father’s passion for the family’s colonial ancestors and imported into his scientific research the conviction that the roots of New England’s regional superiority lay in its puritan past.”⁵⁴

Drawing from Chamberlain’s conclusions, one might say that Charles *biologized* his father’s filial piety by transmuting puritan identity into the hereditary idiom of the germ plasm. If, as his eugenic assessment of Lyman Abbott indicates, Charles understood Puritan identity as a racial category, then the germ of this category appears in Amzi’s genealogy. Amzi’s book attempted to track the persistence of Davenport identity through time and space, that is, *inter-generationally*, using the ideas of “marriage” and “issue” to chart the history of his family. His work therefore evidences a conception of providence that was *becoming* propagative in scope and practice. The emphasis here is important because his understanding of genealogy had no

⁵³ Chamberlain, *The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle*, 165.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 175

comprehension of the biological body as the source of New England's special identity. And yet the filial piety demonstrated through his genealogy might be described as *proto-racial*, representing an early attempt to think about the significance of a founding American family not solely in terms of its unique religious convictions but as a distinct propagative line. Amzi offered a new way of thinking about what it meant to be puritan by suggesting that, through the offices of marriage and family, religious ideals were something that one could be born into. His son developed this idea by arguing that puritans constituted a special stock, insisting that the peculiar qualities of puritans were innate to their germ plasms. In biologizing puritan identity, eugenic science obscured some of its overt religious significances, while at the same time transmuting its core characteristic of election into the biologicistic idiom of the germ plasm.

Davenport's puritan identity shaped his career in profound ways. Most significantly, his sense of hereditary election authorized his role as the cultivator of the national germ plasm. Mainline eugenic policies like immigration restriction, compulsory sterilization, and anti-miscegenation laws were all predicated upon the idea that society possessed the authority to occlude the hereditary impact of allegedly unfit bodies. Mainline eugenicists like Davenport exuded profound elitism in believing that their heredity allowed them to demand the eugenic control of others' bodies, especially those of immigrants, poor whites, and blacks. The hereditary elitism that enabled Davenport to claim authority over these bodies was in no small degree derived from the alleged superiority of his puritan ancestry.

While Davenport never overtly invoked his puritan ancestry during his public career, his racial pedigree nonetheless undergirded his professional authority. As Chamberlain argues, mainline eugenics received its greatest support from old stock New Englanders.⁵⁵ Matthew Frye

⁵⁵ Ibid., 169.

Jacobson observes a similar connection between New England identity and support for eugenics when he argues that eugenics tapped into a prevailing “Anglo-Saxon complex,” which deployed a nativist ideology that fused whiteness, political fitness, and national character in order to justify the state’s obligation in “tending to the biological make-up of its population.” Jacobson’s classic work locates the nucleus of eugenics’ support within an elite cadre of Harvard-educated Anglo-American nativists who founded the Immigration Restriction League in 1893.⁵⁶ Both Chamberlain and Jacobson’s analyses indicate that eugenic thought and practice preceded the actual rise of mainline eugenics in the early twentieth century, developing through the racialization of New England identity during the latter half of the nineteenth. As Chamberlain’s work specifically attests, packed into this racialized identity were assumptions about New England that were distinctly religious in origin. Notions of providential election, of a special and divine mandate, suffused the mainline eugenic concept of New England as a racial stock, even as this concept often lost its explicitly religious connotations through the process of biologization. Amzi’s proto-racial piety marks an early moment in this process; his son’s career in eugenics marks its culmination. In this way, it is important to observe that no matter how much Davenport made a career out of scientific professionalism, the success of mainline eugenics intimately depended upon a racial formation in which mainline eugenics was only the final chapter.

Eugenic science did not invent the idea that New England constituted an elect racial body. Such an idea had emerged as early as Bushnell and had been popularized through his work. In his vision, New England would Christianize the world through the “out-populating power” of its seed. He made it possible to think about New England not as a model Christian society but as an elect race. His work thus provided the first step in a longer process whereby the

⁵⁶ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 77.

racial body of New England became sacrosanct. After Bushnell, the racial body would increasingly become an object of religious veneration, the medium through which God was working to Christianize the world. Eugenic science built upon this tradition of venerating New England as a racial body, yet it departed from racialized discourses of Christian nurture by re-codifying this racial body in the scientific terms of germ plasms and determiners. In so doing, eugenic science claimed this racial body as an exclusive object of scientific control and development, secularizing this racial body by closing it off to religious influence and rendering it seemingly mundane by insisting that this body could be bred like cattle and racehorses. But no matter how much it profaned the uniqueness of this body through its biologicistic idiom, eugenic science never completely diminished its sacredness. In fact, eugenics amplified it. Portending the disappearance of old stock New England and the impact this would have upon the country, Davenport opined at the First National Conference on Race Betterment: “In this very matter of our great stock must we depend upon the persistence of them. How we regret to see the testimony that the best of that grand old New England stock is dying out through failure to reproduce.”⁵⁷

Davenport regarded the puritans very differently than his father had. What made the puritans patriarchs of American society for Amzi were their religious ideals. What made them patriarchs of American society for his son were their germ plasms. The contrast between these two viewpoints is striking. Charles measured New England strictly in terms of its genetic potential. In the eugenic view of things, for example, Lyman Abbott was a man of peculiar religious vision. But more importantly, he was the bearer of New England germ plasm. He was

⁵⁷ Charles B. Davenport, “The Importance to the State of Eugenic Investigation,” *Proceedings from the First National Conference on Race Betterment*, ed. Emily F. Robbins (Battle Creek, MI: Race Betterment Foundation, 1914), 455-56.

the propagator of a racial body that Davenport esteemed as a national resource, a racial body that had to be preserved, protected, and made to increase through enticements to reproduce. To put it frankly, Davenport regarded Abbott as something to be bred and not as a religious icon to be emulated. But how could Davenport get old stock New Englanders to think of themselves in such a way? For that matter, how could he get *all* white Americans to recognize their racial duty not in terms of Christian nurture but as producers of racial protoplasm?

Trustees of the Germ Plasm

As a eugenicist, Davenport viewed the country in terms of its genetic potential. He believed that America represented the unrealized evolutionary possibility of producing an exceptional white race. In a paper in which he argued that the United States needed to adopt a more selective immigration policy, Davenport outlined this perspective:

Three hundred years ago the Americas were a clean slate upon which was to be written the history of the upbuilding [sic] of a civilized population from the beginning. There was an opportunity for developing a population freed from the burden of the persisting remnant of Paleolithic man with its limited intelligence and self-control. Even at the time many saw in this situation the opportunity for realizing in some measure utopian ideals. If we look back over these centuries we can see what has actually occurred and we note with regret how far have these ideal possibilities failed realization.

As Davenport saw it, the opportunity for developing a white race that embodied superior morality and intelligence had been jeopardized from the very beginning. While there were puritans who constituted a virtuous stock, there were also explorers, traders, and convicts who were either “lured to the New World” out of self-aggrandizing interests or who were sent there as part of their punishment for lack of self-control. “Even at the outset,” Davenport argued, “all kinds, good, bad, and indifferent, represented in the Old World, were established in the New.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ “Lectures,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

If there were good and bad varieties of white stock in America and if this undermined the evolutionary possibilities that the New World had to offer the white race, this was not the worst part for Davenport. After the colonization of the New World by various white stocks, there came what Davenport called, “the greatest tragedy of all,” –namely, the “introduction into this white population of hundreds and thousands of the negroes from the banana zone of Africa which many regard as the lowest in the scale of intelligence and self-control of all the races of men, excepting perhaps the native Australians.” The economic demand for cheap labor made by the institution of slavery, Davenport insisted “was blind to the consequences of the introduction of a germ plasm inferior in the determiners for intellectual development and moral control.” Davenport argued that the importation of slaves had dire consequences for the development of American populations, as it had precipitated hybrid stocks in Central and South America who represented a “restless, dissatisfied, unadjusted, unharmonious people, ill adapted to developing an ideal civilization.”⁵⁹ In asserting as much, Davenport was invoking a widely accepted theory that reproduction between races (especially white and black) produced mentally and morally unbalanced offspring, a theory that Davenport himself had helped to promote.⁶⁰

Davenport offered these supposed facts regarding the consequences of race mixing to insist upon more selective immigration policies: “Every breeder of animals knows that he must not import domesticated races which have no satisfactory pedigree.” Selective immigration would protect the racial germ plasm from the hereditary influence of inferior whites and non-whites alike, which for him necessitated that all potential immigrants to the country undergo

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Charles B. Davenport and Morris Steggerda, *Race Crossing in Jamaica* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1929).

eugenic screening to verify their heredity.⁶¹ While Davenport painted a somewhat dire picture of the impact that the history of race crossing had had upon the possibility of evolving a better white race, he nonetheless insisted that this did not mean that all hope should be abandoned. “Can anything yet be done to save a continent so sorely damaged? [...] The possibilities that existed 300 years ago are forever lost but because things are bad is no reason for making them worse.”⁶²

Davenport’s understanding of national history as a kind of genetic experiment rationalized his support for sterilization and anti-miscegenation laws, which, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, targeted poor feeble-minded whites. White paupers, criminals, and deviants, eugenicists argued, possessed poor hereditary endowments. They were also prone to crime and sexual immorality given their diminished capacity for self-control and disposed to having “unnatural” relations with non-white races. The sexuality of poor whites represented a dysgenic threat to the race, since their phenotypic whiteness made it much more likely for them to introduce degeneracy into the racial germ plasm. Immigration restriction, eugenic sterilization, and eugenic-inspired anti-miscegenation laws: these were justified by mainline eugenicists as practices that would protect, preserve, and enhance the white racial body.

Equally important for mainline eugenics as a science for protecting and enhancing the white racial body, however, were positive eugenic strategies. The evolutionary potential of the white race could only be augmented if “fit” whites were encouraged to reproduce. As one historian argues, during the 1910s and early ‘20s mainline eugenicists focused on enacting

⁶¹ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, 213.

⁶² “Lectures,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

negative eugenic legislation.⁶³ After the successful passage of the eugenics-inspired Immigration Act of 1924 and the Supreme Court's decision in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, however, eugenicists began to focus on developing a substantive positive eugenics program that would socialize eugenics not primarily as an ideology that justified racially hygienic proscriptions, but, moreover, as a positive ideal that could shape the reproductive lives of fit whites. This included getting fit whites to select eugenically fit marriage partners, to marry younger so as to have more time for family, and to have more children. Positive eugenics also included getting those who possessed deleterious traits to forego marriage and family out of racial responsibility. Most generally, positive eugenics revolved around socializing reproductive responsibility to the race, which included naturalizing the idea that all reproductive decisions should consider the potential impact upon the race's germ plasm.

Positive eugenics had several objectives. Most importantly, positive eugenic initiatives presented a solution to the quagmire of differential fertility. Native whites of superior stock, so the argument went, tended to have fewer children, while those from unfit stocks tended to have many children. The reproductive disparity between good and bad white stocks was increased by social factors. Those who supposedly descended from good stocks were socially and economically successful, having less time for family, while those from poor stocks were dependent on social institutions, which allegedly provided them with the resources to reproduce exponentially. Non-white immigrants also tended to have a lot of children and their unrestrained reproductivity, mainline eugenicists insisted, threatened to overwhelm the less prolific native white stocks.

⁶³ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 30.

Mainline eugenicists listed various reasons for differential fertility. They excoriated social welfare policies that allegedly encouraged the “undeserving” poor to proliferate in numbers. They also frequently blamed the career-mindedness and individualism that they saw increasing in middle class white culture. In this respect, young, career-minded women received a great deal of critical attention, but eugenicists were also concerned about the ambitions and vices of young men as well. Other important factors for differential fertility identified by eugenics included a rising divorce rate in the white middle class, which for them more generally underscored the declining sanctity of marriage.

Mainline eugenicists cautioned fit whites about the dangers of differential fertility as early as the 1910s. A prominent eugenic example includes a 1918 article published by two eugenicists in *The Journal of Heredity*. Entitled, “The Approaching Extinction of the Mayflower Pilgrims,” the article attempted to warn Americans about the immanent danger of race suicide. This was the same eugenics article to which Newell Dwight Hillis had responded in 1919. The article was incredibly important for raising awareness about the issue of differential fertility and is worth revisiting here.

Drawing from data obtained through a “biographical study of the Mayflower families,” the authors demonstrated that the scions of the Mayflower had slackened their reproductivity over the course of the nineteenth century. The result, the authors declared, was that superior old stock American families were being out-reproduced by inferior white and non-white stocks. Citing differential birthrate as a cause of national decline, the authors portended, “A society in which those with superior inheritance do not perpetuate their stock will eventually suffer racial decay.” The authors argued that the problem of race extinction could only be solved by “effective dissemination of a sense of racial obligation” among old stock American families. In

other words, Mayflower descendants had to be taught their reproductive duty to the race. If they refused this duty and allowed their “present birth rate to continue for another 300 years,” the authors prophesied, “it will be possible to put all their surviving descendants back again into the Mayflower [with] no overcrowding.”⁶⁴ The article served as a mainline eugenics enjoinder to America’s old stock families to reproduce more for the sake of the race. Implicit in this enjoinder was the mainline eugenic notion that the very character and identity of the country depended upon the fertility of these families.

Mainline eugenicists recognized that a successful positive eugenics program was a much more difficult thing to bring to fruition than negative eugenic measures. Most were committed to making positive eugenics a voluntary enterprise, which necessitated getting fit whites to reproduce not through the threat of sanction or even the encouragement of law but through their own desire to advance the evolution of the race. Mainline eugenicists fervently believed that eugenics would only be truly successful in developing the race’s genetic potential if white Americans were personally committed to its objectives and morally, emotionally, and intellectually motivated by its ideals. This is why eugenicists frequently spoke of their hope that eugenics would become a religion. In a lecture that he delivered at the Battle Creek Sanitarium’s Golden Jubilee celebration in 1916, Davenport himself imagined eugenics as a religion. “Every religion,” Davenport asserted, “should have a creed. So I suggest a creed for the religion of eugenics.” The first part of Davenport’s creed went as follows: “I believe in striving to raise the human race, and more particularly our nation and community to the highest plane of social organization, of cooperative work and of effective endeavor.” Davenport hoped that eugenics would function as a heartfelt conviction, with the advancement of the race being perceived as a

⁶⁴ S.J. Holmes and C.M. Doud, “The Approaching Extinction of the Mayflower Descendants,” *Journal of Heredity*, Vol. ix, No. 7, (Nov. 1918), 296-300.

moral imperative and not as an external injunction. Davenport enjoined his audience to see themselves as “trustee[s] of the germ plasm,”⁶⁵ presenting eugenics as a kind of reproductive love for the race.

Promoting eugenics as a positive ideal presented a major difficulty for mainline eugenicists, however, because their genetic science of the germ plasm radically reconceived the foundation of marriage and family. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, white middle class Americans were inclined to locate the foundation of the home as a social institution within the sentimental economy of the household. In locating racial development exclusively within the production of germ plasm, however, eugenics offered a different way of defining the social importance of the family. Mainline eugenics located race betterment within the procreative act itself, which, in effect, moralized parental sex as the foundation of the home and the vehicle of race uplift. This shift proved quite scandalous for some.⁶⁶ As already discussed, it also represented a departure from models of race betterment that imagined a central role for religion. Importantly, however, this shift did not occur apart from religion, but within and through important intellectual currents promoted by Protestant leaders and churches. Racial theism was one such current, providing an important discursive vehicle for helping Davenport to socialize eugenics as a positive ideal and allowing him and his supporters to redefine marriage as a sacred trusteeship of the racial germ plasm.

To help promote positive eugenics, Davenport publicly allied himself and his science with Protestant modernists. Davenport even joined them in their public fight against fundamentalists like William Jennings Bryan. In a response that he wrote to an open editorial

⁶⁵ “Lectures,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁶⁶ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53-83.

penned by Bryan and published by *The New York Times* on February 26, 1922, Davenport wrote about the challenge that evolutionary biology posed to fundamentalist sensibilities. “It would probably bring a shock and a feeling that a blasphemy was done to tell the sentimental American that he is himself a living being, just like a dog or a cat. He would preserve his self-esteem, however, by the repartee – ‘Yes! but something more!!’” Davenport wrote the *Times* article in response Bryan’s haranguing of “theistic evolutionists,” who, in Bryan’s estimation, dared to see evolution as part of God’s plan. In responding to Bryan, Davenport separated the issues of cosmogony and Biblical inerrancy from the question of authentic religion. One could still believe in God and in the importance of the Bible, Davenport maintained, while believing in evolution. Allying himself with the evolutionary theists that Bryan attacked, Davenport averred, “If Mr. Bryan will read the ‘good book’ he will find that pure religion has nothing to do with cosmogony.” “Evolution and God,” Davenport continued, “are two names for the same thing. He who denies the one denies the other also.”⁶⁷

Scholars have characterized Davenport’s work as atheistic and no doubt it appeared that way to many of Davenport’s contemporaries, especially fundamentalists like Bryan and modernists like Mathews. But Davenport was not opposed to religion *per se*, only those religiosities that refused to follow biological science in locating the truth of life within biological processes. Davenport argued that the biologist’s “faith” –and he himself used the term *faith* –did not look to scripture for testimony of God’s plan for the world. In contradistinction to the fundamentalist, Davenport averred, “The biologist has his own idea of what is the word of God. He believes it to be the testimony of nature. This testimony has to be wrung, as it were, out of nature but in this way evidence can be secured and has been secured that is incontrovertible.”

⁶⁷ “Lectures,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

The testimony of nature, Davenport maintained, was that life was a subsisting and generative force that produced constant change through species differentiation. This testimony contrasted sharply with the fundamentalists' belief in creationism, which posited a fixed natural order fashioned by God with humans at the top. Speaking as an evolutionary biologist, Davenport wrote, "The conception of a world that does not change is one that may have seemed possible to monks shut in their cells; but everyone who has travelled and observed widely knows that the face of the earth is changing; and everyone who has lived with and bred animals and plants knows that they are too changing."⁶⁸ In insisting that the dynamic vision of the world offered by evolution contradicted the stable one supplied by creationism, Davenport was not rejecting belief in God. He was, however, rejecting any conception of the absolute that did not identify divine agency with nature as a creative, dynamic, and evolving power. He was also insisting that evolutionary biology, and *not* theology, was the queen science, and that any speculation about God had to begin with evolutionary mechanisms themselves.

Davenport practiced a disciplined scientific naturalism aimed at uncovering and explaining the biological mechanisms of evolution. For him, there was nothing remotely mystical or mysterious about life. It would yield all of its secrets to human knowledge and eventually be understood in its smallest details. And yet Davenport's work might be understood as racial theism taken to its logical conclusion: the final collapse of any and all distinctions between divine agency and the biological perpetuity of the white racial body. Put differently, Davenport's work was theistic in the sense that he divinized the white racial body itself. In an unpublished manuscript for a biology textbook, for example, Davenport argued that the chromosomes were the most important mechanisms for human evolution: "[N]othing passes from generation to

⁶⁸ Ibid.

generation except through them. So fateful, indeed, are the chromosomes that had they been known 2 millennia ago the Greeks would probably have created a temple to them.”⁶⁹ Davenport was not simply exaggerating to make a point. One of his great desires for eugenics was to transform the racial body into something sacred, even an object of worship. He wanted trustees of the racial germ plasm who could help Anglo-America finally realize its genetic potential.

Albert E. Wiggam and Trusteeship

Davenport never attempted to fully develop his concept of trusteeship, but he endorsed the work of someone who did. Albert E. Wiggam was one of the most famous promoters of eugenics during the 1920s.⁷⁰ Wiggam was a best-selling author on eugenics who argued that, far from obsolescing religion, eugenics fulfilled God’s redemptive plan for the race. While Wiggam saw eugenics as a “new religion,” he believed that it fulfilled the “ethical essence of the Bible,” furnishing “the final program for the completed Christianization of mankind.”⁷¹ Partnered with eugenics, Christianity would supply the ideals necessary for transforming young Americans into trustees of the racial germ plasm. Wiggam was perhaps most famous for formulating a “biological Golden Rule” that supported his concept of trusteeship: “Do unto the born and unborn as you would have the born and unborn do unto you.” Scholarship on American eugenics often dismisses Wiggam’s work as popular eugenics.⁷² Davenport, however, took Wiggam quite seriously. He nurtured the development of Wiggam’s ideas during the 1920s through

⁶⁹ “Davenport, Charles B.,” Charles Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁰ Mark Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 72.

⁷¹ Albert E. Wiggam, *The New Decalogue of Science* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1923), 110-11.

⁷² Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, 59.

professional correspondence, praising Wiggam's books as a "powerful appeal for eugenics" and insisting that his work "will do much good." Davenport valued the assistance that Wiggam's publications provided in transforming eugenics into popular gospel. He even gave copies of Wiggam's *The Fruit of Family Tree* as Christmas gifts in 1924.⁷³

Wiggam's work can be read as the most comprehensive attempt to promote the eugenic concept of trusteeship and it came with Davenport's approval. In fact, trusteeship served as the founding tenet of Wiggam's eugenic religion, although he further developed the concept by combining it with Christian motifs. In Wiggam's best-selling work, *The New Decalogue of Science*, he wrote, "Eugenics is simply the Golden Rule down the stream of the protoplasm. The men of the future will be born from that stream and its quality depends solely on us."⁷⁴ It is difficult to take Wiggam seriously unless one understands that he was trying to develop a discourse that divinized the racial body. The racial germ plasm was, in Wiggam's narrative, immortal and sacred, representing an evolving substrate of life that persisted beyond all of the individual bodies through which it passed. "A boy is not a chip off the old block," Wiggam wrote, "but a boy and his father are chips off the same block". They are both born from this stream of germ plasm from which has been flowing toward us, always varying, from the beginning of life, and will flow on until it empties into the see of eternity."⁷⁵ Wiggam developed Davenport's concept of trusteeship by reframing it as an overtly Christian enterprise, one with immediate consequences for the establishment of God's will on earth. Eugenics, Wiggam argued, was the "only thing that can fulfill" the redemption promised by Christianity, but it

⁷³ "Wiggam, Albert E.," Charles Benedict Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁷⁴ Wiggam, *The New Decalogue of Science*, 109.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 73-74.

needed people to help it realize its redemptive promise.⁷⁶ Wiggam admonished his readers to cooperate with natural law, which he also referred to as “the will of God,” imploring them to see trusteeship of the racial germ plasm as a sacred undertaking by which they could become a “coworker with God.”⁷⁷

If he did not agree with every line, Davenport sympathized with Wiggam’s project as a whole. He certainly found the broad strokes of Wiggam’s work compelling, especially since so much of Wiggam’s books attempted to dutifully convey the truths of eugenics. In synthesizing eugenics and Christianity, Wiggam began with eugenic ideas and worked backwards. He stressed the main tenet of eugenic orthodoxy when it came to race betterment –namely, that religious-cultural forces “will not directly improve the *inborn* righteousness, educability, artistic and religious capacities or tendencies of the human breed.”⁷⁸ He dismissed supernaturalism as religious superstition, arguing for biological materialism as the only lens for understanding God’s redemptive purposes. Indeed, God revealed his will for the race only through the “instrumentalities of science,”⁷⁹ Wiggam maintained. “[I]nstead of using tables of stone, burning bushes, prophecies and dreams to reveal His will, He has given men the microscope, the spectroscope, the telescope, the chemist’s test tube and the statistician’s curve in order to enable men to make their own revelations.”⁸⁰ In Wiggam’s account, eugenics revealed God’s will by

⁷⁶ Ibid., 110-11.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 119-120.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 18.

studying the racial germ plasm and uncovering the mechanisms behind evolutionary change. Davenport would have wholeheartedly agreed: race redemption was utterly biological.

Wiggam's concept of trusteeship invoked the aristo-hereditary sensibility that eugenicists like Davenport embodied. Speaking of the elect stocks who had "transformed America from wilderness to [an industrialized] world power," Wiggam asked, "Will these men and women of prayer and iron and children be America's continuing breed? Or will the children disappear and the prayer and iron vanish with them?"⁸¹ Trusteeship of the racial germ plasm also necessitated keeping America's stocks pure and thus greater attention to strengthening national boundaries, which would "help prevent the peoples of lower development from wandering and migrating en masse hither and thither over the earth, pouring their mongrel blood into richer racial streams." "Nations," Wiggam concluded, "can not progress to any high standards of social life, gentility and polish, nor to any ordered working of political institutions, without a homogeneous national mind, a common racial outlook, similar cultural traditions, common language and literature."⁸²

Wiggam's concept of trusteeship represented a way of socializing eugenics' specific approach to race betterment, facilitating a shift in race betterment discourse that enabled eugenicists to moralize race propagation as a sacred duty to the racial body. In this respect, the matrix of Christian symbols that it marshaled were important in translating eugenics into idioms familiar to liberal Protestant audiences. But, as we will see more fully in the final chapter, the specificity of this matrix is less important than the more general racial theism that Wiggam helped to deploy and that appealed to a significant number of modernist Protestants during the 1920s. Wiggam's work provided modernist clergymen with a theistic paradigm for reimagining

⁸¹ Ibid., 171.

⁸² Ibid., 227-28.

America's churches as trustees of the racial germ plasm, which underscores the extent to which trusteeship had become the dominant model for conceiving the redemptive promises of race propagation.

The notion of trusteeship allows us to reframe mainline eugenics as an important chapter in the history of racial theism in the United States. In important ways, trusteeship testifies to the fact that biological science superseded moral nurture in the quest for race betterment. To embrace trusteeship meant that one had to follow the dictates of modern biology, which stated that race advancement occurred through the production of germ plasm and not directly through religious or moral influence. But if this is true, then we must understand that this paradigm shift occurred *through the development of racial theism and not apart from it*. The rise of eugenics did not require the abandonment of God's promise to propagate a righteous race. In fact, to modern day prophets of race redemption like Wiggam, eugenics fulfilled this promise. "And now, to-day in the electron of the atom and in the germ cell of living protoplasm," Wiggam wrote, "we have at last come upon God in His own workshop."⁸³

Wiggam and the AES Sermons

A number of AES contest participants followed Shailer Mathews in defining evolution as a social process that would be assisted by eugenic interventions within human heredity. But the modernist vision endorsed by contest participants was largely different than the one proposed by Mathews. It was different because it defined evolution as a material process. And it was different because it was also a highly racialized modernism. Following Davenport and Wiggam, contest participants overwhelmingly supported a racial theism that articulated Christianity's evolutionary role in terms of the cultivation of the racial germ plasm rather than the inspiration of the higher

⁸³ Ibid., 119.

faculties through nurture and education. The difference represents not a distortion of Mathews' "true modernism," however, but simply a development within modernism itself. During the 1920s, Wiggam provided a template for modernist clergymen to reimagine the church as an important agency for the cultivation of the white racial body.

AES contest participants frequently quoted Wiggam in their sermons. They also often implicitly or explicitly referenced his ideas. The 1926 contest winner, Phillips Endecott Osgood, for example, compared the germ plasm to a "bit of yeast" that a "mother sets aside for her next baking," just as Wiggam had in *The New Decalogue of Science*. Directly quoting Wiggam, Osgood explained to his congregation that, like yeast, the "germinal material" "takes no part in the plant or animal but in due time is passed on so that another animal or plant grows from it."⁸⁴ In the idiom of eugenic science in which it was couched, such an idea supported the practice of trusteeship. Indeed, Osgood encouraged his congregants to become stewards of the racial germ plasm. "Our bodies are trustees of this immortal continuity of the germ plasm," Osgood told his Episcopal parish in Minneapolis, Minnesota, "which has come down from generation to generation since life began." This biological fact, Osgood maintained, "enhances our realization of the sacredness of sex."⁸⁵ Christians should live to protect the racial germ plasm from corruptive influence of bad heredity by redefining the sanctity of marriage as a privilege for fit people only. In this way, Osgood promoted Wiggam's work by enjoining his church to become a coworker with God in improving the racial body. Importantly, neither Osgood nor any other contest participant ever completely dismissed nurture. Nurture was still important for bringing

⁸⁴ "Osgood, Phillips E.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA. Wiggam, *The New Decalogue of Science*, 73.

⁸⁵ "Osgood, Phillips E.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

out pre-existing capacities within the germ plasm. Like many other participants, however, Osgood characteristically prioritized trusteeship as model for understanding God's redemptive plan for the race.

Following Wiggam meant that contest participants conceded quite a bit of ground to scientific materialism. After all, it would have been impossible to reference Wiggam without suggesting that it was biology and not religious nurture that would ultimately prove to be the source of human redemption. Generally speaking, the modernism espoused by the sermons was thus different from Mathews', which had described science as a tool or method for religion. But focusing too much on this subverted hierarchy runs the risk of missing an important point about the relationship between eugenics and Protestant modernism. Mainline eugenicists were keenly aware that they required Christian churches' help in authorizing both the narrative and the initiatives of eugenics. Tersely put, eugenics needed Jesus.

CHAPTER 6: TRUSTEESHIP: THE AMERICAN EUGENICS SOCIETY'S SERMON CONTESTS

“There is a higher law of evolution, that is the improbability of the race, through improved families. All social progress is the result of mentality wedding mentality. Religions have failed, governments have failed, social systems have failed, but the blending of noble traits through marriage has never failed.”

-Cameron P. Duncan, AES Sermon Contest, 1926

Introduction

In the late teens and early twenties, eugenicists began paying greater attention to churches as allies in promulgating mainline eugenics. In their popular eugenics textbook, for example, Paul Popenoe and Roswell Johnson celebrated religion as a “motivating force,” a culturally specialized “agency adapted to reach great masses of people with a eugenics ethics, and to infuse this with the necessary emotional basis that will result in action.”¹ Religion, in other words, was well equipped to motivate people to “foster lines of conduct that on the whole will be good for the race.”² In addition to the emotional power that the churches wielded over action, mainline eugenicists regarded churches for their natural selective function. Such was reflected in the advertisement that the American Eugenics Society ran for the 1926 contest: “Since the churches are in a measure a natural selective agency and since a large percentage of the intelligent classes are church members, it is hoped that the message of eugenics will be received by thousands of people who would not otherwise hear it.”³ As eugenically selective agencies, churches interested

¹ Paul Popenoe and Roswell Hill Johnson, *Applied Eugenics* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935 [1918]), 227.

² *Ibid.*, 212.

eugenicists for three specific reasons: because they served as an important place where young people met and married; they exerted authority over the reproductive sphere; and they attracted people who were, allegedly, inherently moral and intelligent. As both shapers of conduct and reproductive agencies, eugenicists viewed the churches as institutions that could help them promulgate eugenics as a modern reproductive morality aimed at protecting and enhancing the racial germ plasm. The churches, eugenicists believed, were agencies naturally disposed to spread their gospel of trusteeship.

This chapter explores pro-eugenic sermons written by modernist Protestant ministers for the AES in the late 1920s. Established in 1921, the AES was a eugenics agency organized with the explicit purpose of promoting mainline eugenics across the country.⁴ As part of its propagandizing program, the AES sponsored sermon contests in the late 1920s and early '30s in order to spread the gospel of mainline eugenics in American churches. This included the 1926 contest in which Kenneth C. MacArthur, the minister who we met at the very beginning of this dissertation, participated and took second prize. The sermon contests were one of several “special short-time ‘stunt’ projects” staged by the AES in its effort to ignite eugenics into a popular movement.⁵ Sermon contests were held in 1926, '28, and '30 at the height of mainline

³ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 120.

⁴ Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111.

⁵ A document from the AES Popular Education Committee dated September 9, 1930, lists the following methods for fostering public support for eugenics: media (including newspapers and magazines), lectures, exhibits, printed materials, and “special short-time ‘stunt’ projects,” which included Fitter Family contests, sermon contests, essay contests, and “community surveys and follow-up.” “Popular Education Committee” folder, American Eugenics Society Papers. Other projects for launching eugenics’ modern gospel of race betterment to the top of public consciousness included “Fitter Family” contests, which, as scholars have shown, proved

eugenics' influence upon American social policy. Despite the legislative victories for mainline eugenic initiatives during the 1920s, American eugenicists sought to capture the hearts and minds of everyday Americans. Eugenicists believed that their science of race betterment would not truly succeed unless transformed into a popular religion. Eugenics, they insisted, should not work externally and negatively through the law but internally and positively through the hearts and minds of everyday Americans. With contest rules stipulating that the sermons be preached in front of regular church-going congregations, the AES saw the contests as a way of converting lay Americans to the cause of eugenics.⁶ Sermons were submitted by ministers from across the country, but primarily from the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Over seventy of these sermons still exist in the AES archives. It is unclear how many ministers participated in these contests in total. Christine Rosen notes that the AES reported having received 150 requests for written rules for the 1926 contest.⁷

The overwhelming majority of sermons submitted to the AES were preached by modernist Protestant ministers. These ministers' participation in the contests does not simply demonstrate modernist enthusiasm for eugenics. It underscores a much longer history of modernist engagements with evolutionary thought and practice in an effort to transform Christianity into a propagative faith. Through its analysis of the AES sermons, this chapter argues that participating ministers promoted eugenics as part of an established theological tradition of drawing upon evolutionary ideas and practice to conceive God's redemptive work in

incredibly popular during the 1920s. See Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38-58. Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 132-61.

⁶ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

racially propagative terms. Contest participants were overwhelmingly racial theists. The majority also supported the biological approach to race betterment promoted by mainline eugenicists, following Charles Davenport and Albert Wiggam in viewing race propagation as a material practice of cultivating the racial germ plasm.

Mainline Eugenics and the Churches

Contests participants were aware of the role that they and their churches were being asked to play by the AES. Many even argued that only churches possessed the necessary resources for making eugenics a popular religion. On Sunday morning, June 6, 1926, at the Church of the Christian Union in Rockford, Illinois, Rev. Charles Parker Connolly typified the self-awareness demonstrated by contest participants in attempting to galvanize his church to the cause of eugenics. Like many of his fellow contest participants, Connolly insisted that the churches were uniquely suited to transform eugenics into a matter of conscience:

The treatment this hour is impelled by deep conviction. The most important need of the [eugenics] campaign now is an emphasis upon its distinctly religious aspect. That is not the bias of the pulpiteer, but the verdict of the scientists. Francis Galton, ‘the founder of Eugenics’, said that this science ‘must be introduced into the national conscience like a new religion’. The American Eugenic Society desires ministers to preach on the subject [...] But in the pulpit our great contribution to the cause is an appeal to conscience.⁸

Scholarship increasingly demonstrates that American churches powerfully shaped the popularization of eugenics in the United States. American Catholic churches, as Sharon Leon argues in a recent work, represented mainline eugenics’ most vociferous opponents. While Catholic clergy were often sympathetic to eugenicists’ attempts to strengthen marriage and home life, they rejected the explicit racism that often energized American eugenics discourse.⁹

⁸ “Parker, Charles Connolly,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Especially after Pope Pius XI's condemnation of sterilization in 1930, Catholic clergymen doggedly opposed negative eugenics. Leon's analysis demonstrates how the ethnic make-up, religious sensibilities, and ecclesial organization of the Catholic Church allowed for a sustained and rather uniform rejection of mainline eugenics within American Catholic communities, particularly as the issue of sterilization came to divide public support for eugenics.¹⁰

Like Catholicism, Southern evangelical Protestantism also negatively shaped America's acceptance of eugenics. While he does not focus on the role of Southern Protestant churches per se, Edward J. Larson argues that the "peculiar religiosity of the South" thwarted the popularization of eugenics in states like Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi.¹¹ The "biblically orthodox standards" of the "Deep South," Larson maintains, prevented eugenics from ever gaining inroads into white Southern communities. Larson suggests that, among other things, the ideological opposition between Southern evangelical Christianity and evolutionary science precluded eugenics from capturing public support as it did in the North, Midwest, and West, where a pro-evolution, liberal form of religiosity often dominated Protestant church life.¹²

If Catholic and Southern evangelical churches stymied public acceptance of eugenics, however, liberal Protestant churches facilitated it. This is the consensus of a small body of scholarship that, since Larson, has focused on the ideological convergences between liberal Protestantism and eugenics, especially in those professional circles where theological modernism

⁹ Sharon Leon, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 19-28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66-88.

¹¹ Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 11.

¹² Ibid., 13.

dominated. Using the sermons written for the AES' contests, for example, Christine Rosen argues that liberal Protestant leaders and churches helped to popularize eugenics through a modernist commitment to harmonizing religion and science within the cooperative endeavor of building God's kingdom to earth.¹³

In insisting as much, Rosen follows the conclusions of Dennis L. Durst, who argues that the postmillennial rhetoric of the kingdom of God "provided a key nexus" between liberal Protestant churches and eugenics.¹⁴ Both Rosen and Durst help us to understand how, especially as it developed in the 1920s, theological modernism threaded liberal Protestant churches and eugenics together within a common ideological matrix. Yet they neglect to consider the issue of race as it applies to liberal Protestant religiosity at the time. Focusing exclusively on Christianity and science, Rosen and Durst overlook the explicit racialism that often animated theological modernism and that helped socialize eugenics discourse within liberal Protestant churches. Amy Laura Hall's more recent work captures this point. Hall shows how modernism functioned as a multi-dimensional platform that allowed mainline Protestant churches and leaders to imagine themselves as "spokespersons" for the eugenics movement.¹⁵ In Hall's analysis, theological modernism synthesized religion, evolution, *and* racial thinking within an expansive ideological matrix that, at the level of popular discourse, blurred the boundaries between religious and eugenic rhetorics.

¹³ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 183-84.

¹⁴ Dennis L. Durst, "Evangelical Engagements with Eugenics, 1900-1940," *Ethics and Medicine*, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 46.

¹⁵ Amy Laura Hall, *Conceiving Parenthood: American and the Spirit of Reproduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 219.

Importantly, Rosen, Durst, and Hall all emphasize that eugenics did not develop apart from liberal Protestant denominational life; rather, modernist Protestant churches, leaders, and publications provided the very ideological and institutional circuitry through which mainline eugenics spread. Their work thus helps to explain the regional limitations of eugenics' popularity and the national distribution of participating churches in the AES sermon contests. Sermons came predominantly from ministers from the Northeast, Midwest, and West, those areas in which modernist currents were most prevalent. Of course, there were exceptions—one sermon was submitted by a minister from the South (North Carolina) and another by a minister from the Deep South (Louisiana)—yet these exceptions can be taken to prove the rule.

Following these scholars' conclusions, one might view the sermons not simply as instances of Protestant ministerial support for mainline eugenics. Much more significantly, one might see them as a window into the formation of Protestant modernism itself. The sermons demonstrate that the popularization of mainline eugenics and the development of theological modernism proceeded hand-in-hand during the 1920s, with the theistic framework of modernism transforming eugenics into a pressing issue for liberal Protestant churches. In fact, the sermons are only the tip of a much larger and longer historical formation in which white, liberal middle class Christianity came to understand itself in terms of race propagation. Understanding the sermons in this way helps to explain the earnestness that many ministers demonstrated in arguing that race betterment was fundamentally a religious issue. Rev. Joseph MacNaughton Waterman from Baltimore, Maryland, for example, asked his congregants, "Is it any wonder that the Church should be concerned with the subject of eugenics? Is not the Church trying to bring humanity into a living union with God? Is it not keeping with the will of God that the race should

improve?”¹⁶ Rev. David E. Adams from Ware, Massachusetts, insisted that Christianity was fundamentally concerned with progress and that the only true source of progress was “race progress.”¹⁷ Rev. Connolly from Rockford, Illinois, agreed. “We must become convinced that there can be no subject greater than [eugenics].” “All other fascinations of our age pale before the glory of this unique challenge of modern thought. For after all, what are improved radios and automobiles in comparison with an improved race?”¹⁸

The Nature of Human Nature

“Man is not yet made,” a contest participant declared to his congregants. “The process of creation is not yet complete. It is a slow process, all creation is.”¹⁹ Invoking the modernist tenant that humanity represented an unfinished creation, the sermons unanimously concluded that eugenics was not simply moral, but a Christian method for achieving God’s spiritual purpose for the race. As Kenneth R. Close, a Methodist minister from Rock Creek, Ohio, pleaded to his congregants, “Let religion join forces with science, then, and direct humanity upward, by processes of natural growth, to the perfection of the Father, revealed in Jesus.”²⁰

¹⁶ “Waterman, Joseph MacNaughton.” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁷ “Adams, David E.” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁸ “Connolly, Charles Parker.” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁹ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁰ “Close, Kenneth R.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

There were two forms of modernism preached in the sermons, both of which saw eugenics as a tool for evolving a more Christ-like personality in the race. The first, or *personalist* modernism, followed Shailer Mathews in emphasizing evolution as a social process and in defining Christianity in terms of its regenerative power upon the human animal. The second, or *determinist* modernism, followed Albert E. Wiggam and mainline eugenics by emphasizing evolution as a biological process revolving around the practice of race hygiene. Both modernisms assumed that human animality imposed material constraints on the development of moral volition, while they also both identified morality, intelligence, and will power as higher faculties. Moreover, both modernisms saw eugenics as a way of strengthening volitional faculties through hereditary endowment. Yet the two modernisms diverged over the nature of personality, with personalists viewing the higher faculties as transcendent or non-material powers and with determinists insisting that these faculties were genetic in origin. Other significant points of divergence included personalists' commitment to Lamarckism and determinists' attempt to pattern a modernist faith on the principles of mainline eugenics. Determinists also overwhelmingly promoted racial theism. The majority of contest participants articulated a determinist viewpoint. Indeed, personalists represented only a small minority.

Both personalists and determinists followed the modernist position in viewing evolution as a struggle against the animal part of human nature. Rooted in biology, animality was a source of human sinfulness that threatened to undermine social order. One minister from the 1926 contest articulated this idea when he opined that man must attain "victory over himself. Man's own self by him must be redeemed and glorified, then follows the train of Kingdom Come." The minister saw eugenics as a method for triumphing over the base impulses of the human animal, a

victory that promised a greater realization of the divine in the race.²¹ J.B. Hollis Tegarden invoked a modernist understanding of human nature by describing criminals as being “governed by animal impulses and not by human mental control.” In asserting as much, Tegarden implied that criminals lacked the “human” part of human nature. Criminals were too instinctual, bereft of higher capacities that could keep their animal propensities in check. They were, in short, spiritually degenerate.²² Another minister echoed Tegarden. “Perfection,” he avowed, “is not within the grasp of the mentally and morally defective. It is an achievement that requires the complete working together of body, soul, and mind.”²³ Yet another contest participant described criminals as “not sensitive to fine distinctions of right and wrong.” Overly animalistic, the minister exclaimed, criminals were “devoid of spiritual imagination and irresponsive to Divine touch!”²⁴ For all of these ministers, animality described a base instinctiveness that came at the expense of higher spiritual faculties. These ministers support for eugenics was thus a part of their modernist commitment to evolving a higher spiritual comportment within the race.

Personalists differentiated themselves by insisting that the higher spiritual faculties were non-material in nature. Thus, one minister averred, “Man is an animal. He is more than an animal –he is an animal plus Something. But he is an animal. He has a biological background.” The minister identified the spiritual nature of humanity as that which separated it from the animal

²¹ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²² “Tegarden, J.B. Hollis,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²³ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁴ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

order, while simultaneously conceding that “man” was a part of that order. Like Shailer Mathews, he located the possibility for human uplift within the spiritual. “By virtue of that ‘something plus’ in man,” the minister concluded, “he is the only animal that can be self-improved.”²⁵ In insisting as much, the minister was invoking the non-materialist idea that Mathews had championed in arguing that it was only by virtue of the personality that human nature could be improved. Human evolution, Mathews had maintained, only progressed because of the spiritual nature of humankind itself, which allowed the human race to rise above its animality by aspiring to ideals that originated not from below but from above. For Mathews, human nature was a spiritual-biological composite, but it was the spiritual that truly defined the human in so far as it alone could aspire to the heavens. Hence, in arguing that evolutionary advance proceeded by way of the “something plus in man,” the contest participant was locating his support for eugenics within a modernist position that maintained, as a matter of faith, a distinction between the spiritual and material elements of human nature.

Ministers supported eugenics because it promised to improve human nature by regenerating the material conditions of life. This was true for all ministers, even those who, like the minister above, espoused the personalist view. A.F. Cunningham, for example, argued that “man has a spiritual nature,” one that distinguishes him from the rest of creation and that makes him innately long for God. “There is a kind of deity in every man that cries out for the divine,” Cunningham insisted to his audience. “There is an immortality in every human soul that hungers for the Immortal. And to satisfy these longings, these yearnings, these hungerings of our Spiritual nature, is the chief aim and end of the Christian Religion.” As a personalist,

²⁵ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Cunningham believed that human nature had a material basis and this meant that Christianity had to focus on biology if it wanted to enlarge the personality. Cunningham argued, therefore, that Christianity had to teach the importance of good ancestry as part of its ministrations of life: “The time to begin the training of a child is four hundred years before he is born,” he maintained in a passage that underscored his Lamarckian commitments while also emphasizing his concern for biology.²⁶ Cunningham believed that the spiritual nature of the human race would grow with better hereditary endowment. Hence, regardless of whether or not contest participants agreed on the exact composition of human nature, they unanimously affirmed the Christian import of eugenics as a method for making righteousness inborn.

The difference between personalists and determinists often came down to the limitations they ascribed to the regenerative power of Christianity. One minister, articulating a personalist viewpoint, believed that the human animal was always responsive to the regenerative influence of religion. “Ever over us bends the Eternal God, offering inward reinforcement, fresh accession of energy, help immediate and immense,” the minister assured his audience.²⁷ The minister explained that the human will was never beyond hope of redemption. The “miracle of humanity,” the minister concluded, is that “hereditary tendencies may be resisted by the strength of the human will.” The minister rejected hereditary determinism, while affirming the power of Christianity to reform human nature regardless of its material limitations. His rejection, however, placed him in the minority.

²⁶ “Cunningham, A.F.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁷ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

The majority of ministers articulated a determinist viewpoint by arguing that heredity represented a medium or substrate of life that was closed off to the influence of religion. Quoting Thomas Carlyle, a Presbyterian minister named J. Calvin Mead from Tenafly, New Jersey, observed, “Everywhere [...] the human soul stands between a hemisphere of life and another of darkness.” Instead of arguing that the hemisphere of “darkness” could be filled with, or transformed by, the light of Christianity, this minister came to a much different conclusion: “But there is a line below which the soul is not permanently responsive to religion; a stratum of society where education and sociology are helpless and ineffective.” Mead supported eugenics because, as he reasoned, it provided a potent method “for dealing with those below the line we have indicated.”²⁸ Mead was not alone in insisting that heredity imposed serious limitations upon religion. Nor was he singular for championing eugenics as a science that made it possible to reform human character from the ground up, or from the animal outward, rather than from above, as the personalists maintained. “Character is not some transcendental thing, imposed from without,” a minister explained to his congregants. “It is in the germ-plasm. The idea that character is accidental or issues through some special providential interference is pure superstition. Character is unfailingly the sum of human inheritances.”²⁹ Another minister articulated the determinist viewpoint as a ratio: “More than three-fourths of the elements which build up a human soul are in its nature, not its nurture.”³⁰ This point supported determinists’

²⁸ “Mead, J. Calvin,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁹ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁰ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

more general claim that human direction of evolution had to subordinate the administration of nurture to the genetic cultivation of nature.

Determinism corresponded with ministers' endorsement of eugenics as a practice of race hygiene and their tendency to espouse racial theism. To argue that there was a place within the human animal that was unresponsive to the regenerative influence of Christianity was tantamount to accepting the idea that certain racial stocks would always be inferior to others. Determinists often accepted the biological superiority of old stock America as a given and associated God's redemptive plan for humanity with its evolutionary advance. They supported eugenics as a biological method for protecting and improving the white racial body, seeking to supply eugenics with a theistic framework for sanctifying its evolutionary work and its racial sensibilities.

All three winners of the 1926 contest were determinists. Phillips Endecott Osgood, minister of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, took first prize in the contest. In his sermon, Osgood educated his congregants on the principals of eugenic science. Modern hereditary science, Osgood insisted, teaches that the body has no influence on heredity. Heredity produces the body but the body plays no part in the production of hereditary materials. Lamarckism, Osgood argued, was wrong: heredity was beyond the uplift of religious nurture.³¹ Kenneth C. MacArthur, winner of the contest's second prize, concurred. While the environment was still important for the development of the inborn capacities within the organism, heredity represented the deciding factor in human difference. What made one person or group better than another was not environment but biology. "The Pilgrims have produced splendid personalities in spite of the harsh environment to which they were subjected," MacArthur orated from his pulpit

³¹ "Osgood, Phillips E.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

in Sterling, Massachusetts, in a flourish that underscored his racial sensibilities. “While the convicts who went to Australia, in spite of favoring soil and climate, have produced great slums.”³² F. Olin Stockwell, the contest’s third-prize winner, struck a more philosophical note by speaking of heredity as an autonomous creative power that subtended environment. At an evening service at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Lamont, Oklahoma, Olin declaimed, “But that God has ‘breathed into man the breath of life’, the breath of creative life, of life that reproduces itself for generation upon generation and thus largely determines, not only its own destiny, but the fate of countless multitudes as well, -this is a fact that staggers our boldest imagination.”³³ In Shailer Mathews’ idiom, Olin had effectively personalized the impersonal force of biology.

It is important to observe that Osgood, MacArthur, and Olin all won the contest’s top three prizes not simply because they capitulated to the biological materialism of mainline eugenics. While their success no doubt had to do with their knowledge of mainline eugenic precepts, it had more to do with their ability to synthesize this knowledge with the modernist platform, a synthesis that contest judges imagined would provide an important contribution to the socialization of eugenics in America’s churches. Charles Davenport, who served as one of three judges for the 1926 contest, liked MacArthur’s sermon the best.³⁴ As a scientist, he was no doubt drawn to MacArthur’s faithful rehearsal of a number of scientific case studies that allegedly demonstrated the power of biology in shaping human nature. But he was also drawn to

³² “MacArthur, Kenneth C.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³³ “Stockwell, F. Olin,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁴ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

MacArthur's racial theism. Suggesting that national virtue was tied to the cultivation of Anglo-American "racial traits," MacArthur's theism framed eugenics as an agent of Christian redemption. "We believe that the whole creative process has resulted in man as its highest product, but that evolution will not be complete until a higher type of human beings, filled with grace and truth after the likeness of the Son of Man, prevails."³⁵ Davenport would have seen MacArthur's statement of faith as an important medium for spreading the gospel of eugenics among church-going Anglo-American Protestants, the kind of people eugenicists like himself had always counted among the nation's hereditary elect.

In imagining biology as the primary shaper of the human personality, determinists were just as likely as personalists to champion Christ as a spiritual ideal, as Shailer Mathews had in his own work. Yet determinists viewed salvation through Christ as a hereditary process of incarnation rather than a social process of moral uplift. One might say that, for them, salvation was an inside-out matter of using biological processes to develop the Christ-like qualities up and out of the animal. Put differently, it was a matter of developing the mental, intellectual, and moral faculties by stewardship of the racial germ plasm. While not all of the ministers comprehended the fine points of mainline eugenics, they nonetheless understood and supported its prioritization of biology as a medium for populating God's kingdom.

Take, for example, Rev. Alfred O. Elliott, who preached a sermon on May 9, 1926, at Brooklyn Heights Presbyterian Church in San Diego, California. Elliott began his homily with the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy: "When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also." Recalling the assertion made by Oliver Wendell Holmes that "man is largely

³⁵ "MacArthur, Kenneth C.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

an omnibus in which all of his ancestors ride,” Elliott explained the eugenic significance of the verse: Timothy had inherited his character and capacity for faith from his mother and grandmother and, in insisting as much, Paul was conveying the eugenic ideas that “blood counts”; “family traits are transmitted”; “children resemble parents and grandparents in many ways”; “physical and mental characteristics and also spiritual qualities are passed on from one generation to another.” Now, a normal reaction to Elliott’s exegesis of 2 Timothy 1:5 might involve incredulity, for Paul or whoever penned the epistle clearly did not have eugenics in mind in this exhortation to early Christians to keep the faith. But incredulity over Elliott’s slipshod hermeneutics also helps to confirm something substantive about the religiosity of determinists: what was at stake for ministers like Elliott was not the historical veracity of scripture, but the body –its “physical and mental characteristics and also [its] spiritual qualities.” The religious preoccupation was not the Bible as the revealed Word of God, but the hereditary body, the *Word made flesh*, or the body that, to return to Elliott’s idiom, innately exemplifies “the ideal suggested by the Master when He said, ‘I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly’.”

Elliott argued that Christianity and eugenics had a common interest: the production of a race that embodied the ideal of Christ. Like so many other ministers, Elliott compared heredity to a stream: “As a stream rises out of some pure mountain lake and starts toward the sea, blessing all the land through which it passes, so a noble family sends forth children, grandchildren and generations that make the world happier and stronger. They fill life of noble thoughts, worthy deeds and generous impulses.” Through his fluvial imagery, Elliott asked his congregants to imagine heredity developing over the course of generations, moving like a stream through the coming together of germ plasms in the production of wholesome American families. Salvation,

Elliott insisted, was a matter of attending to the stream's purity. Marriage, therefore, should be reserved for those "worthy families" who, like Timothy's, innately possessed "talents, abilities, and gifts of mind and heart." For it is precisely these families, Elliott insisted, who will provide a pure stream and thus ensure that "the ideals, traditions, and principles of our national life [are] transmitted to future generations."³⁶ Elliott assumed his congregation was comprised of such hereditarily elect families, for their interest in the higher standards of Christian life allegedly confirmed as much. The point of Elliott's eugenic homily was thus to encourage his congregants to re-envision salvation as a biological process of purifying heredity. Jesus, he suggested, was in the racial germ plasm, and he enjoined his church to participate in Christ's salvation by marrying well, having a lot of children, and supporting negative eugenic measures.

The Sermons and Racial Theism

The AES sermons have confounded some scholarly attempts to make sense of them. After all, what business did religious clergymen have supporting a science that was concerned about germ plasms and not souls? Rosen, for example, answers this question by concluding that contest participants were, theologically speaking, "creative, deliberately vague, or perhaps even, as their critics contended, deeply confused."³⁷ But Rosen's analysis, which clearly understands that the sermons played an important part in helping to popularize eugenics in modernist churches, misses one of their most important contributions to the socialization of mainline eugenics –namely, the *discourse of racial theism*. The sermons enjoined church-going Americans to see the white racial body –which was an intergenerational, national, and shared body –as something sacred and even divine. Overwhelmingly supporting eugenics as a practice

³⁶ "Elliott, Alfred O.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁷ Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 184.

of race hygiene, the sermons imagined the white racial body as a hereditarily elect body, believing that this body needed to be protected from, and purified of, degenerative elements. The sermons are, therefore, not evidence of theological confusion. They represent a racialized trajectory of modernist theology, the origins of which go back to Horace Bushnell. If mainline eugenics taught white Americans to see the racial body as something that could be cultivated and improved, ministers encouraged their congregations to see this body as a medium or substance through which God was propagating a people who could build his earthly kingdom.

Take, for example, a sermon delivered by Dr. George Huntington Donaldson at Grantwood Congregational Church in New Jersey on Sunday morning, June 13, 1926. Donaldson reinterpreted Genesis' seven-day account of creation in evolutionary terms, describing each "day" of creation as an evolutionary epoch. At "the end of the sixth division of creation," Donaldson narrated, "man appears, walking erect, superior to all other creatures, made to have dominion and lifting his face 'from the clod' and all its evolutionary strivings and struggles to the higher planning intelligence, his God." As a modernist, Donaldson insisted to his congregants that the "creative plan of God" called upon humans to be "his co-worker or agent in continuing his progressive creation." Maintaining that God's creative work was presently ongoing in the evolution of American stock, Donaldson assigned Anglo-Americans a leading role in God's redemptive plan. "Oh, my fellow Americans," Donaldson addressed his congregants,

Thine is no common heritage,
Grand memories on the shine,
The blood of Pilgrim nations
Commingled flows in thine.

Donaldson's ideas and arguments allow us to understand how theological modernism and mainline eugenics converged through the discourse of racial theism. In Donaldson's mind, God

was not simply working through human evolution; moreover, God was working through the “blood of Pilgrim nations,” which possessed “no common heritage.” In this way, his sermon underscores how racialized modernist conceptions of the divine could be at the time. But his sermon also demonstrates the fluidity between modernist theology and mainline eugenic thought during the 1920s. In a rhetorical crescendo in which he purposefully collapsed any distinction between the white racial body and God’s evolutionary immanence, Donaldson imploringly asked his congregants, “Can we, after beholding the Stream of Life coming down from the Eternal, enriched by the struggles of all the noblest and purest lives of the Past: can we destroy that divine image, the Stream of Life in us or shall we transmit it, pure and undefiled, in all its richness, to the coming generations?”³⁸

Racial theism, or the idea that God was incarnating his spirit within and through the evolution of the white racial body, represents the most significant way in which the sermons, and theological modernism more generally, helped to socialize mainline eugenics in modernist churches across the country. Contest participants encouraged their congregations’ families (both actual and potential) to devote themselves to God by helping him reproduce a more righteous race. Importantly, however, there was some disagreement over which families should contribute to the eugenic cultivation of the racial body. As discussed in the last chapter, eugenicists like Davenport held up old stock American families as a hereditary ideal. While Donaldson represented the overwhelming majority of contest participants by celebrating old stock families’ uncommon pedigree, a few ministers were critical of the elitism expressed by the notion of old

³⁸ “Donaldson, George Huntington,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

stock America. Several wanted a racial ideal that white families from all social stations and geographic regions could embrace in committing themselves to God's evolutionary work.³⁹

This critical awareness was demonstrated in a number of ways. A.F. Cunnigham insisted that fit, godly white families could be found in all parts of the country and thus, he implied, not only in New England.⁴⁰ Thomas Colley, pastor of First Methodist Episcopal Church in Little Valley, New York, went even further by insisting that racial theism ought not to be conceived in classist terms, an argument that highlights Colley's self-consciousness as a white man who had risen from rather humble beginnings. Colley articulated the most self-conscious critique of racial theism, arguing that, if it simply reflected the prejudices of well-to-do whites, racial theism would limit the work of eugenics and wrongfully narrow the scope of God's creative purposes. "Whatever may be desirable eugenically," Colley opined, "the criteria for fitness must be established on such a plane as to rule out such individual predilections and whimsicalities, as well as the baneful distinctions of caste and class, so often nurtured at the expense of that fair society involved in the old but noble phrase 'the kingdom of God'."⁴¹ Colley believed that white families from all social stations could produce fit offspring, although he *did* think that the bulk of the nation's unfit came from the poorer classes. He also believed that, by

³⁹ There was one minister who rejected racial theism altogether. H.H. Hester from Kirwin Congregational Church in Kirwin, Kansas, declared, "With all due pride in our parents and ancestors, let us nevertheless cease to think that we are any better than the Mexican Indian because our forebears came over in the Mayflower, or because we are sons and daughters of the Revolution. 'For God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth'." "Hester, H.H.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴⁰ "Cunningham, A.F.," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴¹ "Colley, Thomas," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

recognizing that fit people could rise from meager beginnings and by encouraging fit white families from various social stations to have more and better children, the churches would guarantee the propagation of a sufficiently wide set of attributes and values so as to ensure that the “prototype of the race” did not merely perpetuate class prejudice.

Colley’s remarks draw attention to how supporters of eugenics understood the sources of race degeneracy. Most contest participants believed that unfitness primarily originated with immigrants and poor whites, assuming that middle and upper class white society was comprised of fitter stocks. While they would have admitted that some forms of degeneracy like insanity and certain genetic diseases (e.g., propensity to tuberculosis) were transmitted among the more affluent classes, they would have presumed that these classes were generally fitter since, in their minds, fit stocks naturally rose to the top of society while unfit stocks settled at the bottom. In this way, society reflected the natural stratification of stocks according to their taste, abilities, and overall fitness. These presumptions underscore the fact that eugenics could be as classist as it was racist. But they also highlight the stakes of Colley’s arguments. He emphasized that unfitness could come from all ranks of white society and not just the lower strata; but he agreed with other participants in assuming that the lower strata were *largely* to blame for the production of unfitness. He simply wanted eugenicists to be careful about dismissing the lower classes outright.

The vast majority of contest participants were far less critical than Colley of the classist assumption that affluence denoted eugenic fitness. Duncan P. Cameron, a Presbyterian minister from Cottage Grove, Oregon, even insisted that the real problem facing American society was

not “race suicide” but “class suicide.”⁴² The idea was that well-born white American families were being out-reproduced by their inferiors. Like most of his compatriots, Cameron assumed that degeneracy proliferated at the bottom, which demonstrates that racial theism circulated predominantly within white churches of actual or aspiring affluence.

Regardless of where they stood with respect to the origins of race degeneracy, however, participants agreed that unfitness thwarted God’s procreative purposes for Anglo-American stock. Colley himself enthusiastically supported negative eugenic policies like the segregation and sterilization of the unfit, which promised to eliminate degeneracy from the white racial body. He referred to these policies as a “eugenic sieve,” which, he conveyed, must “operate so as to eliminate ultimately, yet give temporary privilege to, the unfit, if racial improvement is to be a reality in the face of protections of civilization.”⁴³ As the quote suggests, Colley was concerned that modern society coddled the unfit through the development and expansion of programs that helped the poor. Articulating a common argument from the sermons and from eugenics discourse more broadly, Colley insisted that public welfare programs upset natural selection by allowing the unfit to reproduce in prolific numbers.

Ruth K. Hill, the only documented female participant in the AES contests, agreed with Colley. Delivering her sermon at Park Baptist Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, Hill argued that eugenics hastened “the coming of the kingdom for which we pray,” enjoining her congregants to throw their support behind a science that promised to produce a “society of perfected men and women functioning on this earth in an ever increasing perfection of goodness,

⁴² “Duncan, Cameron P.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴³ “Colley, Thomas,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

beauty, and intelligence.” In order to realize the “Christian ideal” of the kingdom, Hill insisted that eugenics had to purify the racial body through measures like immigration restriction and sterilization. If “our American heredity is to be continually lifted rather than lowered, the immigration to our country must be regulated according to the quality of the family stock.” Only eugenically fit families should be admitted to the country so as to ensure the purity of the national germ plasm. Hill also supported voluntary eugenic sterilization, declaring, “The feeble-minded, the paupers, the criminals, the insane, the weak and the sick who are a burden economically and socially belong in the class of the unfit and should voluntarily eliminate their personal inheritable qualities from the racial stock.” Hill concluded by warning her congregants against the consequence of not embracing the “redemptive methods” of mainline eugenics: “Unless we can eliminate the defects in the present flood of unselected germ plasm [...] we will find American greatness increasingly diminishing.”⁴⁴

As Colley and Hill’s arguments suggest, racial theism sanctified negative eugenic policies by describing unfitness as an affront or impediment to God’s purifying work in the life of the race. An anonymous minister who participated in the 1926 contest expressed this idea by describing degeneracy as a stain or impurity within the racial body. Comparing the racial body to a timeless river, like Donaldson had, the minister declared,

Let us look back along its course, back through the generations of human life. Find the impure streams of social disease, bred of vice and sin, flowing into this river of human life. See the putrefaction of criminal strains of life added to it. Note the currents and eddies of diseased mind or enfeebled intellect. Gathering all these things into its tide, it flows across the ages down to the present hour and moment. It receives our own lives into its current and surges onward through all Time, onward to the ocean of Eternity.

⁴⁴ “Hill, Ruth K.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

For the minister, the river represented not only the racial body but also the body of God: some call the river evolution, he asserted, “others call it God.” In this way, the metaphor of the river was highly reductionistic, collapsing a series of scientific and religious concepts together within a single fluvial image (e.g., God, life, heredity, evolution, and race). But the river conveyed an important religious idea –namely, that the transmission of unfitness through reproduction represented a stain on the body of God, an idea that, in turn, justified negative eugenic measures. Hence, if the transmission of unfitness polluted the river and attenuated God’s life giving power, as the minister reasoned, then Christians ought to support negative eugenic policies, which promised to remove unfitness from the river. “From this Stream of Life,” the minister avowed, “we shall have cut off every source of pollution and contamination, and the promise shall be fulfilled that ‘Everything shall live whither the stream cometh’.”⁴⁵

As I discuss in the next section, racial theism also supported modernist churches’ endorsement of positive eugenics through the concept of trusteeship. If God was working to perfect the racial body, so the argument went, then fit church families should cooperate with him by bringing eugenic principles to bear upon their reproductive lives. Here, however, I would like to focus on the relationship between racial theism and negative eugenics.

While the above minister’s metaphor of the river allowed his congregants to visualize the importance of negative eugenics, racial theism did not do its most important work through the visual register. Rather, its most significant contribution with respect to the socialization of mainline eugenic initiatives in American churches was the *affective* work it did with respect to the problem of unfitness. If the sermons are any indication of things, racial theism did not simply provide Americans with a religious framework for understanding the issue of degeneracy, if by

⁴⁵ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

understanding we mean strictly a cognitive process. Much more profoundly, racial theism influenced church-going Americans' attitudes about unfitness. Most contest participants were not as illustrative as the minister above. Rather than painting fluvial images that would allow their congregants to visualize the divine in the life of the race, they simply assumed that their congregants already associated whiteness with divinity and instead played upon their emotional sensibilities. This demonstrates that racial theism was just as much an affective comportment as it was a cognitive framework. Indeed, when racial theism was working at its best, it operated primarily as the former.

Racial theism structured an affective economy in the sermons that opened and circulated between two poles: love for fitness and perfection, on the one hand, and repugnance and even hatred for unfitness, on the other. Take, as an example, Rev. J.B. Hollis Tegarden's sermon, which was preached at First Unitarian Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, on June 20, 1926. Tegarden began by lamenting the decline of "the old sturdy stock of New England" and by expressing adoration for this stock's racial vigor. But Tegarden spent the rest of the time attempting to incite his congregants' hatred for degeneracy, implicitly and explicitly likening it to an affront against God. He described the unfit as "weeds" in God's garden. Switching metaphors, he decried the rise of a "lesser breed" of "mental defectives" governed by "animal impulses." Indeed, Tegarden's sermon seethed with righteous indignation, comparing the unfit to animals and refuse and blaming them for a rising tide of degeneracy that threatened the purity of the racial body. Thus, he praised the immigration law and other mainline eugenic measures as a means for "protecting our own germplasm [sic] from being contaminated." But what is most telling about Tegarden's sermon with respect to the affective work of racial theism is that he insisted that only Christianity could supply the emotional resources necessary for inspiring

American devotion to the racial body. Referring to the vision of God's kingdom recorded in the book of Revelation, Tegarden averred, "It has been and still is the work of the church to keep that vision before men, for without a vision the people perish. Without that vision which the church keeps alive there would be no divine end toward which to work. The divine end creates a zeal and enthusiasm which no science can create, and scientists should take cognizance of that fact."⁴⁶

Zeal, enthusiasm: these are emotional registers, but they are also, as Tegarden argues, religious registers. Christianity would make its greatest contribution towards the popularization of mainline eugenics by creating a religious intensity that "no science can create." This was the major intervention made by racial theism with respect to the popularization of mainline eugenics in America's churches. By inspiring fervor for the inviolability of the racial body, the churches would transform eugenics into something felt and intuited, something that circulated beneath the cognitive faculties of the mind and that surfaced like a shock of righteous indignation, a pang of conscience, or even, an outpouring of love. In this way, modernism supported the popularization of eugenics as a practice of race hygiene.

Trusteeship and the Churches

The sermons written for the contests drew upon Albert Wiggam's concept of trusteeship in order to convince their congregants that the church and eugenics were copartners in racial redemption. Ministers addressed their congregations as both *believing* bodies and *reproducing* bodies, using the concept of trusteeship to bridge Christian belief in God and white middle class reproductive habits. The AES contests encouraged these ministers to view their congregations as reproductive communities, while the concept of trusteeship, in turn, enabled ministers to appeal

⁴⁶ "Tegarden, J.B. Hollis," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

to the religious and moral sensibilities of their congregants as both believers and parents, thereby rallying their congregants to the cause of eugenics. In this respect, the sermons performed an invaluable service to the AES, as they brought the message of eugenics to communities that mainline eugenicists viewed as hereditarily elect. Drawing upon Ellsworth Huntington and Leon F. Whitney's popular 1927 eugenic text, the rules for the 1928 contest explicitly referred to members of the country's churches as "Builders of America." America's mainstream churches, Huntington and Whitney believed, were comprised "men and women whose brains are balanced, well directed and active; people of fine temperament, fine intelligence and fine health."⁴⁷ Indeed, contest organizers saw the contest as an opportunity to encourage reproduction within the churches and to thereby increase the "proportion of the population" of the "Builder type." In turn, contest participants used the notion of trusteeship to encourage their congregants to see their eugenic responsibility as Builders in Christian terms and to have more children for both God and race.

Adapting Wendy Kline's arguments in her 2001 work, *Building a Better Race*, trusteeship represented a modernist "reproductive morality." Kline uses this term to refer to the ways in which eugenics functioned as a set of modern sexual proscriptions and incitements that moralized the reproductive body, especially the white female reproductive body. As a reproductive morality, Kline argues, eugenics endeavored to remove "reproductive decisions" from the personal and inevitably selfish realm of "individual desire" by recasting these choices in terms of "racial duty."⁴⁸ As it was developed and promoted by the sermons, trusteeship

⁴⁷ "American Eugenics Society," Charles Benedict Davenport Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴⁸ Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

constituted a distinctly modernist Protestant inflection of mainline eugenics as a reproductive morality, one that framed eugenic sex not only as a racial duty but also as devotion to God and his creative purposes. In this respect, trusteeship facilitated the popularization of positive eugenic initiatives. On the one hand, it allowed modernist clergymen to cast eugenics as a procreative agenda that was Christian in scope and purpose. But just as importantly, it provided church leaders with a paradigm for establishing the church's authority over the reproductive sphere and for insisting upon the continuing relevance of the church during an era when said sphere was becoming the privileged domain of science and medicine. In its multifarious significance as a reproductive morality, trusteeship served the interests of both mainline eugenicists and modernist clergymen, making it possible for churches and mainline eugenics organizations to envision themselves as copartners in race redemption.

At the broadest level, trusteeship denoted an attempt to theologically harmonize eugenics and Christianity within the common practice of race propagation. As one minister who participated in the 1926 contest declared to his congregants, "Today, science and religion are becoming reconciled [...] they are walking in blessed fellowship, sharing each others vision of a well born race, -better physically, intellectually, socially, spiritually, than past generations have ever produced."⁴⁹ As the passage suggests, trusteeship described not just any partnership between religion and science, but a "fellowship" forged explicitly through the hereditary development of the white racial body. Underwriting the minister's characterization of trusteeship as a fellowship between science and religion were a number of theological assumptions that made trusteeship a Christian concept. Most importantly, there was an implicit identification of God's being and agency with the racial germ plasm. Trusteeship was thus supported by a

⁴⁹ "1926 Contest," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

theology of racial immanence: God's kingdom on earth would be revealed through the purification and perfection of the white racial body. It was this theology that sanctified eugenics as a fellowship between religion and science, allowing contest participants to encourage their congregants to view eugenics as an enjoinder to assist God in his procreative work.

On a more interesting level, however, trusteeship described a modernist reproductive morality, functioning as a call to procreative responsibility by redefining sex as a devotional act to God and his procreative purposes. Referring to the gametes, one minister reminded his congregants that God has "placed an enormous responsibility upon us by putting into our hands these cells of life to control as we will."⁵⁰ Another minister described the solemn purpose of eugenic sex to his audience in less explicit terms: "We know that God does work through human agency, that if his kingdom is to come on earth it will be by no divine intervention but by men and women cooperating with him."⁵¹ Rev. Osgood, the minister who took first prize in the 1926 contest, most forcefully conveyed the providential implications of trusteeship as a reproductive morality. In his Mother's Day sermon, Osgood pleaded with his congregants to think of eugenic sex as nothing less than a religious duty, a living soteriology, or a righteous expression of one's love for God and his chosen race. "The future is in our hands," he intoned, invoking his congregation's responsibility for the racial germ plasm. "By creative forethought we can cleanse and ennoble it; by sins of contemporary self-interest we can mar it. By acts as well as by traditional word are we praying, 'Thy Kingdom Come?'"⁵²

⁵⁰ "1926 Contest," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵¹ "1926 Contest," American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

As a reproductive morality, trusteeship involved a number of specific things. First, it entailed viewing marriage and family as a devotion to God and race. It necessitated living “purely” and “cleanly,” which involved confining one’s sexual activity solely to marriage and subordinating one’s sexual desire, if not exclusively then ultimately, to procreative ends. To invoke the most common metaphor employed by contest participants, the general purpose of trusteeship was to protect the “stream of life” (i.e., the racial germ plasm) from impurity while also ensuring that the stream grew in breadth and volume. In literal terms, this simply meant reserving sex for marriage and having more offspring.

Trusteeship also hallowed the institution of marriage through its ideal of reproductive fitness. In describing procreative sex as an act of devotion to an immanent divinity, trusteeship necessitated that only fit people marry and have children, which supported the mainline eugenic initiative to transform marriage into a privilege rather than a right.⁵³ In the eyes of mainline eugenicists, not everyone was called to reproduce, which meant that, for them, marriage itself ought to be seen as a sacred institution reserved for those who could further –and not impede – racial development. Trusteeship inflected this point by insisting that marriage was an institution that God himself had reserved for the hereditarily elect. The eugenic function of marriage was so sacred, in fact, that contest participants insisted that children and teenagers should be taught to see marriage exclusively as a consummation of hereditary election. Invoking a common eugenic syllogism by linking idealism and righteousness with hereditary fitness, one minister admonished his young congregants, “Boys and girls, when you are seeking a mate look for one with high ideals and strong convictions and thus you will be helping to strengthen the race and build up the

⁵² “Osgood, Phillips E.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵³ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 98.

kingdom of God on earth.”⁵⁴ Osgood struck a more solemn note, arguing that children needed to be instructed in the virtue of “mated love.” “Constantly should we nurture in their little minds the concepts of marriage, which are noblest. Little children should be brought to church weddings whenever possible, that they may recognize the sacredness of that ceremony which founds a family.” Implicitly identifying his congregants with the hereditarily elect, Osgood later continued, “With all the awe and all the wholesomeness our reverent experience of parenthood can give us, we must surround the expectation of marriage and child-bearing with holiness.”⁵⁵

But the most important function of trusteeship as a reproductive morality was to convince churchgoers to have more children. Reminding his congregants that God’s redemptive purpose for humanity was propagative in both mode and scope, one minister argued that trusteeship fulfilled God’s promise to the race. “The command is still, ‘Multiply and replenish the earth’,” the minister insisted. “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit –which you have from God – glorify God therefore in your body.”⁵⁶ Rev. P.O. Lowry, minister of a Methodist Episcopal congregation in Hilly, Louisiana, argued that large families alone exemplified the spirit of God’s creativity. Moreover, he maintained that the procreative ideal embodied by large families was solely capable of achieving the perfection that God planned for his race. “[It] is only in the holy relationship of parenthood and in the comingling of large families,” he averred to his flock, “that

⁵⁴ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵⁵ “Osgood, Phillips E.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵⁶ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

the highest ethical and spiritual type can be developed.”⁵⁷ Trusteeship thus inflected the mainline eugenic injunction to the fit to have more children, sanctifying and thereby naturalizing the eugenic ideal of more and better matings as a providential decree.

Trusteeship did important affective work in transforming eugenics into a popular gospel of racial theism. Yet it may seem difficult to understand how contest participants endorsed trusteeship when it so clearly minimized the influence of religious nurture upon race development. While trusteeship emphasized the importance of parenthood and family it nevertheless prioritized breeding. The concept of trusteeship thus represents a shift away from an established Bushnellian tradition of framing race propagation in terms of the affective bonds between parents and children and toward reconceiving race propagation first and foremost as production of germ plasm. This is not to say that trusteeship obsolesced Christian nurture, far from it in fact. While mainline eugenicists and their supporters insisted that environmental forces were powerless to affect the racial germ, they still believed that the environment played an important role in bringing hereditarily latent capacities to development. And this meant that religious nurture had an important function to play in the development of individuals if not the race. Nonetheless, trusteeship was premised upon a new understanding of race propagation in which heredity was conceived as a timeless continuity or an immortal substrate isolated from the immediate influence of religious nurture.

Historically, this new mode of interpreting heredity as a biological substrate corresponded with an attempt to relocate the moral and affective foundation of the home within the sexual bond between parents. Comprehending the appeal of trusteeship for ministers as a religious idea, therefore, necessitates understanding how trusteeship supported this modern

⁵⁷ “Lowry, P.O.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

emphasis on the importance of sex. As a biological concept, the eugenic notion of the germ plasm referred to the creative material produced by the union of gametes. This material housed hereditary substances that supposedly determined human physical, mental, and moral development. Yet the germ plasm was more than a scientific theory that supported mainline eugenics' commitment to biological determinism. It was also a modern scientific affirmation of sex as the cornerstone of healthy family life. For contest participants, therefore, trusteeship did not represent an obviation, obsolescence, or negation of a Christianity conceived in propagative terms, but an attempt to strengthen Christianity as such, albeit through a modern rationale that envisioned the sexual bond between husband and wife as the foundation of the home. As a reproductive morality, trusteeship represented modernist churches' affirmation of this procreative bond and the modern rationalization for the home that it supported.

In her study of American eugenics, Kline argues that during the 1920s and '30s mainline eugenicists were preoccupied with a falling fertility rate among middle and upper class whites, a trend that eugenicists associated with the diminishment of white middle class socio-political power. This preoccupation was exacerbated by a number of things related to female sexuality, including a growing feminist idealization of the career-oriented "New Woman"; an increasing valorization of a companionate model of marriage that emphasized romantic love and equality between the sexes and that de-prioritized childrearing; and, finally, a growing youth culture that celebrated sex for the sake of pleasure and not homemaking.⁵⁸ Kline argues that these trends intensified mainline eugenicists' characteristic obsession with the female body and their concomitant attempt to publicly enshrine female sexuality as a "potential panacea for the

⁵⁸ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 7-31.

problem of race degeneracy.”⁵⁹ Thus, Kline insists, mainline eugenics developed in the 1920s and ‘30s as a reproductive morality that sought to redefine the social role of women in terms of procreation. Although eugenics represented a progressive discourse with respect to female sexuality in that it affirmed the importance of sexual pleasure for women, it was also conservative, seeking to put women back into the reproductive sphere by defining childbearing not as an individual prerogative but as a racial duty. In this way, eugenic sex functioned as a response to shifting patterns within white middle class reproductive culture, with eugenicists using procreative sex to affirm female sexuality while at the same time subordinating it to socially useful ends. Of course, the same shifting patterns within white middle class reproductive culture that preoccupied mainline eugenicists also conditioned white middle class’ acceptance of eugenic initiatives.

Following Kline, one ought to see trusteeship as an important intervention within white middle class reproductive culture, one that sought to subdue female sexuality for procreative purposes. In a sermon that he preached in 1926 at a Congregational church in Newburg, Iowa, Rev. J.D. Stoops declared to his congregants, “The warfare which has resulted between the newly developed romantic sentiment of love and the traditional unity of the family is one of the outstanding problems of modern life.” The issue for Stoops was that modern life severed sex from its proper objective, i.e., childrearing, causing an unhealthy disruption in the female psyche and precipitating social disorder. “Sex impulse dissociated from the objective situation of mother, child, family, community, race,” Stoops averred, “is experienced as a subjective desire which confuses and negates the will. This is a genuine disorganization of life.”⁶⁰ Like scientists,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 8.

psychologists, and marriage counselors during the 1920s, Stoops imagined sexuality as an innate force or drive, which, unless directed toward proper ends, could be socially destructive. He also believed that, like men, women were sexually driven. As a reproductive morality, therefore, trusteeship represented an attempt to both champion female sexual desire and discipline it by reconnecting it to the “objective situation” of motherhood.

Stoops’ arguments regarding the disorganization of female sexuality supports Kline’s claim that, as mainline eugenicists sought to develop a successful positive eugenics program during the 1920s and ‘30s, women were increasingly burdened with the responsibility for racial progress. Kline herself sees evidence for this argument in eugenicists’ celebration of a new type of womanhood, a eugenically productive femininity that Kline refers to as the “mother of tomorrow.”⁶¹ One will find a frank idealization of eugenic motherhood in the sermons, which suggests that trusteeship participated in the construction and promotion of eugenic motherhood in important ways, especially through the positive links that it forged between female sexuality, domesticity, and the providence of race propagation. Contest participants used trusteeship to insist that female sexuality was natural and, when tied to the objective function of procreation, a pillar of the Christian home.

In the version of his sermon that he published in his church’s bulletin, for example, Osgood concluded by reprinting Laura E. Richards’ famous poem, “The Torch Bearer.”⁶² “The Torch-Bearer” was a fable that placed hope for Christian civilization not upon the pen of the

⁶⁰ “Stoops, J.D.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁶¹ Kline, *Building a Better Race*, 7-31.

⁶² “Osgood, Phillips E.” American Eugenics Society Papers. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

“great sage” or the sword of the “Master of Armies” but within the affections between a mother, who represented the “keeper of the gates of God,” and her children. Osgood’s intention in ending his sermon with the popular fable was to idealize eugenic motherhood as an integral part of trusteeship. His objective was also to emphasize that, while trusteeship embraced a more progressive role for female sexual desire in the production of family life, it did not constitute a radical departure from the past. Rather, trusteeship ensured the continuation of traditional patterns of life and the gendered relations that sustained them.

In (anxiously) embracing female sexuality, trusteeship imagined a new basis for marriage and family, one built upon the sexual attraction between husband and wife rather than one exclusively premised upon women’s “natural” capacity as a nurturer. This is not to say that the sermons did not essentialize femininity in terms of women’s supposed inherent qualities as a mother. As Osgood’s sermon attests, they most certainly did. Yet if the sermons idealized the “mother of tomorrow,” they more commonly celebrated eugenic *parenthood* over eugenic motherhood, emphasizing cooperation (if not equality) between the sexes in childrearing. Hence, while trusteeship moralized motherhood along eugenic lines, it also attempted to moralize fatherhood and to thereby bring men into the procreative sphere. In a sermon preached on Mother’s Day 1926, for example, one minister admonished mothers and fathers alike to offer the following prayer in setting out to have a family: “May my offspring be goodly like unto myself; may they contribute to the betterment of the human race; may they be everything I should have liked to be; may they be beloved of man, and approved by God.”⁶³ The prayer was intended to unite young parents in the holy providence of racially reproductive sex.

⁶³ “1926 Contest,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Other ministers were less serene in underscoring race propagation as a partnership between the sexes. Rev. J.A. Hansen chastised men in his congregation who forsook marriage by sowing their oats in “riotous living,” men who perversely filled their lives with the “pollution of lustful and self gratification.” Invoking the concept of trusteeship in order to insist that race propagation was the only godly outlet for sexual desire, the minister opined, “Every man has the substance of reproduction. Every woman has the power of life receiving, life sharing and life nourishing reproduction [...] Surely God is not mocked!”⁶⁴ While Hansen’s arguments suggested a more passive role for female sexuality in reproductive relations, his formulation of trusteeship nevertheless envisioned the production of the racial germ plasm as a co-creation between husband and wife, while providing a biological gloss of the significance of fatherhood for race propagation.

Trusteeship represented an attempt to strengthen Christianity as a domestic practice, with contest participants redefining parenthood as care for the racial germ plasm and with trusteeship thus presenting a way of bringing men and women alike into the procreative space of the home. As a reproductive morality, trusteeship forged a middle way between New Woman feminism, which championed female participation in the economic sphere, on the one hand, and patriarchal conceptualizations of evolution, on the other, conceptualizations that imagined greater and more specialized differences between the genders.⁶⁵ In the sermons’ view, both men and women were responsible for race propagation, while the strength of the Christian home was conceived first and foremost in terms of the sexual bond between husband and wife and their shared

⁶⁴ “Hansen, J.A.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

⁶⁵ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 121-69.

responsibility for the race. As Rev. Waterman from Baltimore, Maryland, explained: “Every home should be a kingdom with its destiny pointed toward a better race. Homes where there is a union of good blood making for royal heritage. Homes where there dwells a great vision of the future of the race. Unbreakable homes which are held together by a spiritual bond.”⁶⁶ Waterman essentially argued that the shared obligation between husband and wife to produce a better race provided the spiritual resources for a new and more powerful foundation for the white middle class home. Such an assertion naturalized sexual desire in terms of its propagative function, celebrated the cooperation of male and female sexuality in the production of “good blood,” and anchored the home as a religio-social institution within a spiritual desire to procreate evidently shared by husband and wife alike.

As a reproductive morality, trusteeship allowed modernists to reconceive the authority of the church in terms of procreative power, defining a eugenic role that only the church –as a body of believing and reproducing “builders” –could fulfill. Contest participants insisted as much not only because of the church’s function as a reproductive agency, but because, as they firmly believed, only the church –as an institution and assembly –could supply the resources necessary to direct sexual desire toward wholesome, procreative ends. Some contest participants maintained that no matter how much eugenicists uncovered the mechanisms of human evolution, they would be at a loss to steer public conscience unless they could direct human sexual desire. This entailed not appealing to humans as rational actors, but as social creatures who desired to live in Christian communities, that is, as emotive, sensate, and sexual beings who desired the righteousness associated with family life. In a sermon that he delivered in Ottawa, Illinois, Rev. George C. Fetter earnestly intoned, “Religion alone can lead the coming generations to see that a

⁶⁶ “Waterman, Joseph MacNaughton,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

man and a woman are co-operating with God in building a spiritual universe when they carefully plan and prepare for happy eugenic parenthood.”⁶⁷ Fetter’s assertion underscores a belief in the unique efficacy of religion to align sexual desire with its “natural,” or procreative purpose, a belief that Fetter shared with his fellow contest participants and that underwrote the special vision that trusteeship articulated for the church in its partnership with mainline eugenics.

⁶⁷ “Fetter, George C.,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

EPILOGUE

Introduction

On Thursday, May 7, 1936, the American Eugenics Society held its annual meeting in the Delmonico Hotel on Park Avenue in New York City. The general topic for the meeting was, “A Eugenics Program for America.” As part of its roundtable discussions, the AES staged a discussion between religious leaders and mainline eugenicists. The purpose of the discussion was to think about the relationship between religion and eugenics. Kenneth C. MacArthur, the modernist minister and lay eugenics enthusiast whom we met at the beginning of our story, participated in the discussion, along with a number of religious and scientific professionals who believed that religion, especially Christianity, could help American mainline eugenics distinguish itself from Nazism.

The debate recorded by the American Eugenics Society demonstrates the extent to which growing awareness of Nazi race hygiene was causing increasing self-consciousness and even consternation over Americans eugenics, especially among eugenics’ supporters. The Nazi quest for racial purity –including the totalitarian apparatus involved in its quest –was forcing American eugenicists and their sympathizers to reckon with the ideals, values, and assumptions that undergirded their own mission to achieve national fitness. The debate is worth paraphrasing because, in this way, it captures a critical self-awareness that was characteristically missing from eugenics as a discourse of progress in the United States. It is important to note that the 1930s has been traditionally viewed as pivotal decade in the history of American eugenics, with scholars

viewing the Depression and the rise of the Third Reich as historical developments that precipitated the rapid decline of mainline eugenics as a popular movement.

MacArthur, for his part, toed the line of modernism. His views on the relationship between Christianity and eugenics had not changed since he delivered his pro-eugenic sermon in 1926. His continued involvement with eugenics came from the confidence and dignity that Christ inspired as an evolutionary ideal. “The church welcomes eugenics,” MacArthur declared to his colleagues at the roundtable, because it remains devoted to Christian “social ideals,” especially “the ideal of a just, friendly world as taught by Jesus –an ideal society among men.” The ideal of Christ and his kingdom, MacArthur furthermore insisted, was not an ideal realized through the death and destruction of unfitness, as the Nazis seemed to believe. Rather, it was an ideal “expressed in terms of the family.” For MacArthur, American eugenics was thoroughly Christian, motivated by the spiritual ideals of marriage and family life. For this reason, he saw no reason why churches should not continue to promote eugenics as part of its Christian mission to propagate human life in the image of Christ. He even outlined initiatives that churches should continue taking in promoting eugenics.¹

There was one person at the debate, however, who was not as serene about the motivations of Anglo-American eugenics as MacArthur. Louis I. Dublin, Vice-President and Statistician at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, did not believe, as MacArthur did, that American eugenics was safeguarded by its Christian ideals. In fact, Dublin questioned whether eugenics in the United States had ever been Christian. “I saw in the eugenics movement a clear-cut challenge to all the ideals that civilization has brought down to us. Religion tells us that there

¹ Ministers, MacArthur maintained, should lead their congregants “to see that there is nothing low-minded about sex”; they should “give premarital advice *including* eugenic principles”; they should “speak to families about the eugenic ideal”; they should “work these ways of looking at life into preaching and into Sunday School teachings.”

is an integrity and inherent dignity to human life. Eugenics said: there are better and worse groups of people. It stressed racial consciousness, which we see in its most diabolical form today in Nazi Germany.” It is important to observe how Dublin spoke of eugenics in the past tense. Unlike MacArthur and other participants in the debate, Dublin perceived eugenics as a science on the wane. Unless eugenics could become motivated by Christian principles, which Dublin associated not with the ideal of social perfection, as MacArthur had, but with the ideal of human dignity, eugenics would be rightfully superseded by more Christian enterprises.

Surrounded by people who wanted to believe that American eugenics was different from Nazi race hygiene, Dublin would not let his interlocutors off the hook, insisting that there were direct ideological connections between American mainline eugenics and Nazism. The same prejudices and commitments that supported eugenicists’ belief in Anglo-American superiority and the same quest for bodily perfection that animated American eugenics, Dublin averred, propelled Nazi destruction of unfitnes. Eugenics, if it were to be saved, must “associate itself with the best religious thought,” which, for Dublin, entailed “addressing itself to those causes which make for misery and poverty and depression of people.” In other words, eugenics had to come to champion the Christian ideal that all human life had value and dignity. “We must get away from the idea that because human beings are *different*, some are *worse*,” Dublin pled to his colleagues after noting the dangers of Nazi anti-Semitism. “Society must protect itself against pollution –yes; but pollution does not consist in the contamination of certain different groups.” If eugenics were to remain viable in contemporary America, Dublin maintained, it had to divest itself of its racialized tendency to discriminate against certain forms of human life and give up on its quest for embodied perfection.

Willystine Goodsell, a prominent writer on family and women's education, sympathized with Dublin's sentiments, although she seemed to believe that American eugenics was already becoming more Christian. Nazi Germany, Goodsell noted, was "distinguished not for its devotion to Christianity, but for its revival of neo-paganism." Goodsell's assertion suggested that American eugenics was not in danger of following Nazi race hygiene in its totalizing war against degeneracy. "It is true that eugenics in the past has laid great stress on the favorable and unfavorable, the desirable and the undesirable," Goodsell admitted. "Eugenics must say *mea culpa* to this charge [...] Today, however, the theory of dividing people into class divisions according to innate ability is definitely weakening in the eugenics group."

Apart from Goodsell, however, Dublin's impassioned argument seemed to be lost on his colleagues. They could not conceive eugenics without the idea that some forms of human life were inherently more valuable than others. Their consternation with Dublin speaks to the fact that, given its entrenched commitment to hereditarianism, eugenics was more or less inconceivable without a method for discriminating between qualified and unqualified life. Henry P. Fairchild iterated this conundrum in his response to Dublin. "There *is* a selective factor in eugenics," he averred, insisting that eugenics would not survive along the path that Dublin prescribed for it. Warning his colleagues against the kind of viewpoint expressed by Dublin, Fairchild observed, "There seems to be a slight tendency, and it seems to be a real danger, for eugenisists [*sic*] to get away from the idea that there are differences –that there is a qualitative element. If we deny this we might as well deny eugenics altogether." Religion, as Fairchild saw it, must supply eugenics with ideals for guiding its propagative work, for without wholesome, moral, Christian ideals, eugenics would have no paradigm for distinguishing its objectives from

Nazi race hygiene. At the present moment, Fairchild suggested to his colleagues, “One of the things we need is to set norms or standards as to eugenic fitness.”

The other participants in the 1936 AES roundtable concurred with Fairchild. Ellsworth Huntington, president of the AES, refused to relinquish the idea that some American families were worth more than others. Following Fairchild, he believed that religious ideals should supply eugenics with its “selective factor,” which Huntington identified as “moral courage.” Invoking an established mainline eugenics argument, he insisted that America’s spiritual founders, the Puritans, embodied this ideal. Yet Huntington modified the racialized presumptions of his famous 1928 eugenics text, *Builders of America*, by stating that, if moral courage were propagated through biology and not environment, as he believed it was, “this quality can be preserved, no matter what the race or the religion.” In insisting as much, Huntington clung to racial theism while at the same time softening its implications. America’s Puritan forebears were hereditarily elect, he maintained, and American national life was rooted in its commitment to the higher ideals that these forebears possessed as a natural hereditary endowment. But Huntington suggested that other stocks could be selected for similar moral qualities. The present need for American eugenics was to continue to emphasize eugenics’ paramount concern with the unique source of American greatness while at the same time encouraging a propagative commitment among all racial stocks to moral courage.²

Nearly everyone at the 1936 AES roundtable missed Dublin’s point. Indeed, he was the only one who fully understood that the way to safely distance American eugenics from Nazi race hygiene was not to anchor eugenics in religious ideals for human embodiment. The norm and ideal of Christ, contrary to MacArthur’s claims, would not save American eugenics, if by that

² “Random Materials,” American Eugenics Society Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

one had in mind a growing human perfection that demanded the elimination of degeneracy. For Dublin, the racialized quest for embodied perfection was itself the danger. American eugenics had to learn a different lesson from religion, one that did not revolve around transcendent ideals for human embodiment. Religion had to teach eugenics that all human life had purpose and dignity. Of course, it might be just as accurate to say that Dublin had missed the point. After all, what would eugenics look like without a standard for determining which kinds of life mattered more than others? For that matter, could there even be eugenics without a commitment to believing in qualitative differences between human groups?

In hosting the roundtable, the AES was not suddenly discovering Jesus in an hour of darkness. Anglo-American eugenicists and their supporters had long understood their science as something moral and even spiritual. Eugenics represented, after all, a struggle against the unevolved, the animalistic. Its theorists and supporters had traditionally comprehended eugenics' higher purpose as a struggle for greater spiritual comportment. No, in hosting the roundtable, the AES was, in a moment of increasing insecurity about its motivations, strengthening its commitment to an established article of faith: eugenics was about preserving wholesome American values and ideals. In an especially anxious hour when Americans were becoming increasingly aware of the aims, ambitions, and excesses of Nazi race hygiene, mainline eugenicists and their supporters were reminding themselves that eugenics was simply attempting to fulfill a providential promise that had always been America's birthright.

And yet, the AES roundtable demonstrates that, by the late 1930s, the modernist discourse of racial theism was on the wane. In this discussion between American eugenicists, one notices increasing anxiety over the plausibility of a singular ideal or standard for guiding the development of an increasingly heterogeneous society. The fact that American eugenics had

been traditionally concerned with producing a body politic more inherently disposed to Christian ideals of morality, ideals that were allegedly rooted in the bodies of those who founded the country, was proving insufficient to save American eugenics from growing consternation over its totalizing ambitions.

Racial Theism and Eugenics after World War II

Traditional historiography of American religions insists that Protestant modernism collapsed in the years just prior to World War II. William R. Hutchison, for example, argues that, as a leading discourse of religious liberalism, modernism gave way to neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s and an ascending distrust of society as an agent of progress. In direct response to modernism's zealous overconfidence in the transformability of human nature and the redemptive authority and power of society, Hutchison maintains, neo-orthodoxy repudiated what it saw as modernism's overt conflation between the natural and supernatural,³ with neo-orthodox spokespersons like Reinhold Niebuhr characteristically expressing disillusionment about "human nature and the idea of progress."⁴

Traditional historiography of American eugenics argues that mainline eugenics also largely disappeared in the 1930s. Contrary to these traditional historiographical assumptions, however, neither modernism nor eugenics disappeared in the 1930s and '40s. Modernism continues to exert influence on liberal Protestantism through the latter's commitment to social stewardship, while eugenics persists through ideas, attitudes, and policies that continue to shape Americans' reproductive lives. What *did* change in the years before and after the Second World War was that racial theism increasingly became a morally untenable discourse, which meant that

³ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 293.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

the Anglo-American Protestant establishment stopped imagining itself, its power, and its civilizing mission in hereditarian terms. These changes brought an end to mainline eugenics as a professional and popular movement, although they did not bring an end to eugenics, if by the latter we simply mean ideas, practices, and policies aimed at facilitating the reproduction of certain groups and preventing the reproduction of others.

I do not mean to attribute the decline of mainline eugenics solely to the fall of racial theism. Nor do I mean to suggest that modernism and mainline eugenics were one in the same thing. They were not. Nonetheless, the two converged through a mutual faith in the ability and authority of society to direct the sources of human life so as to ensure its Christian development. Indeed, they both championed the biopolitical idea that human life –its barest and most basic elements –could provide the material for building a perfect social order. By encouraging a religious habit of identifying heredity with divine creativity and by enjoining humans to cooperate with God in his creative work, modernism facilitated the popularization of eugenic thought and practice within affluent white Protestant communities. It seems hardly coincidental, therefore, that the decline of racial theism corresponded with the demise of eugenics as a popular Anglo-American movement.

The revelations of the Holocaust went a long way in discrediting mainline eugenics.⁵ As scholars argue, however, eugenics was not solely done in by the Holocaust. Critical opposition within the scientific community against mainline eugenics arose in the decades prior to World War II.⁶ And yet the Second World War proved decisive. Afterwards, the religious mainstream

⁵ Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 129-47.

in the United States would condemn mainline eugenics as pseudoscience, with Americans coming to identify eugenics with the notorious violence and discrimination of racial engineering.⁷ The term eugenics has yet to recover. Indeed, it casts a long shadow over twenty-first century genetics and the efforts of those who promote genetic approaches to population development.⁸

But while mainstream America may no longer be able to countenance eugenics as a practice of racial engineering and a political ideology that locates national progress exclusively within the white racial body, eugenics has not disappeared. As a habit of locating socio-political progress within human propagation, as a tendency to discriminate between the propagative potential of certain groups, and as an inclination to use the power of the state to control the reproductive behavior of its citizen-subjects, eugenics persists in the United States. Eugenic ideas and practices persist because the body politic remains an object of management and cultivation. Tied to political and economic discourses of productivity and efficiency, the body politic is still a moralized body, a body subject to the discerning gaze of a governmental apparatus aimed at achieving progress through the healthful development of its citizenry. The privatization of the economy over the past thirty years or so has meant that the production of health is, more than ever, dictated by the ethos and pathos of consumerism. Privatization has seen the emergence of a new form of subject defined first and foremost in terms of his or her economic duties as a

⁷ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Quest to Build a Master Race*. (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.)

⁸ For a self-conscious example of a contemporary evolutionary scientists support for more open engagements with eugenics and the application of genetic knowledge to the controlled growth of human populations, see Geoffrey Miller, "Chinese Eugenics," *Edge*. Available at <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/23838>. Accessed 1/20/16.

consumer/entrepreneur and less in terms of his or her political responsibilities as a citizen.⁹

Nonetheless, the moralization of the body politic as something living and cultivable means that the potential to discriminate between the propagative capacities of certain groups –and therefore eugenics –remains with us.

One need not look far to find proof of the persistence of eugenics beyond the era of racial theism. State sterilization, for example, was practiced in North Carolina as part of its social welfare administration through the 1960s. In fact, state sterilizations in North Carolina increased after World War II.¹⁰ North Carolina sterilizations, which tended to target the reproductivity of poor black females, were rationalized in economic and social terms rather than overtly racial ones, although certainly one could easily make the case that the persistence of sterilization as a viable social policy speaks to the reality of structural racism.¹¹ Nonetheless, the North Carolina eugenics program did not, at least not explicitly, operate under an ideology of racial theism or biological determinism, as mainline eugenics had. Its sterilizations were justified as cost-saving measures and as protections against the destabilization of parenthood and family. North Carolina's eugenics program is, perhaps, most accurately understood as a state-sponsored attempt to eliminate the propagative cycle of poverty. This, of course, does not make North Carolina's program any less eugenic. It simply means that eugenic rationalities have found different inflections through their history.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 267-89.

¹⁰ Kevin Begos, et al. *Against Their Will: North Carolina's Sterilization Program and the Campaign for Reparations* (Apalachicola, FL: Gray Oak Books, 2012).

¹¹ Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Most recently, nearly 150 female inmates in California prisons were sterilized by doctors under contract with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. From 2006 to 2010, the *Sacramento Bee* reports that 148 women received tubal ligations in California correctional facilities. Women who were “deemed most likely to return to prison in the future” were especially targeted. Doctors who performed the operations justified the sterilization procedures in terms of female empowerment. One of the doctors said the sterilizations “provided an important service to poor women who faced health risks in future pregnancies.” Importantly, however, doctors also noted that they were concerned about the burden that inmates’ reproductivity imposed upon society. The same doctor quoted above argued that the costs of the sterilizations was minimal “compared to what you save in welfare for paying for these unwanted children –as they procreated more.”¹² The recent California sterilizations are evidence that eugenics persists through logics and procedures that attempt to control the allegedly deleterious fecundity of the poor. While prison doctors may not have agreed with mainline eugenicists’ claim that poverty was rooted in the biology of inferior racial stocks, they nonetheless believed that sterilization could help end the propagative cycle of poverty and criminality. The fact that the sterilizations received very little national attention suggests that twenty-first century Americans are willing to ignore heavy-handed paternalism when it is aimed at the bodies of criminals and poor people.

Americans today tend not to recognize eugenics apart from scientific racism and negative eugenic policies. This helps to explain why a 2014 book by the conservative and anti-feminist author, Jonathan V. Last, senior writer at the *Weekly Standard* and contributor to the *Wall Street*

¹² Corey G. Johnson, “Female Inmates Sterilized in California Prisons Without Approval,” *Sacramento Bee*, July 7, 2013. Available at <http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/health-and-medicine/article2578036.html>. Accessed 1/20/16.

Journal and *Los Angeles Times*, has not been understood as a eugenics text. Entitled, *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster*, Last foretells the economic and political doom awaiting America as the fertility rate among its fitter classes continues to decline. Equating “demography and destiny,”¹³ Last encourages America’s affluent –the people who, given successful careers, are likely to reproduce less –to have more children for the sake of keeping America’s population young, productive, and competitive with China and other economic powers.

Interestingly, Last seems to have no idea that he is proposing a *eugenic* solution to the problem of American economic fitness. Not once does he use the term to help him define his project or the problems it attempts to solve. Yet what Last proposes is eugenic in scope and practice, even it is not explicitly racist and despite the fact that it is missing a sterilization program to go along with its reproductive inducements to the fit. The quote from the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, which Last reprints on the first page of his book in order to convey the scope of his message, could have come straight out of the era of mainline eugenics: “Demography is the key factor. If you are not able to maintain yourself biologically, how do you expect to maintain yourself economically, politically, and militarily? It is impossible. The answer of letting people from other countries come in [...] that could be an economic solution, but it’s not a solution of your real sickness, that you are not able to maintain your own civilization.”¹⁴ Last’s book suggests that if eugenics does once again become a popular gospel for rejuvenating American destiny, it will be couched in the social, economic, and perhaps even religious conservatism of twenty first century America.

¹³ Jonathan V. Last, *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

While eugenic ideas, practices, and policies are no longer tied to a discourse of racial theism, eugenics nonetheless persists as Americans continue to conceive propagation as a mechanism for both social decline and advance. The tendency to associate eugenics with the destruction of unfitness, the discourse of scientific racism, and genetic engineering may even elide the recurrence of eugenic thought in the United States. Apart from scientific racism, Americans may not be able to recognize eugenic logic as such even when, like Last, they openly endorse it. As a habit of discriminating between who should and should not reproduce or of discerning whose reproductivity is most desirable for societal advance, eugenics endures in spite of the mainstream decline of that rhetoric of racial election that supported Anglo-American eugenics in the early twentieth century.

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